MAN FROM TORONTO, a novelet about a pilgrim with guts

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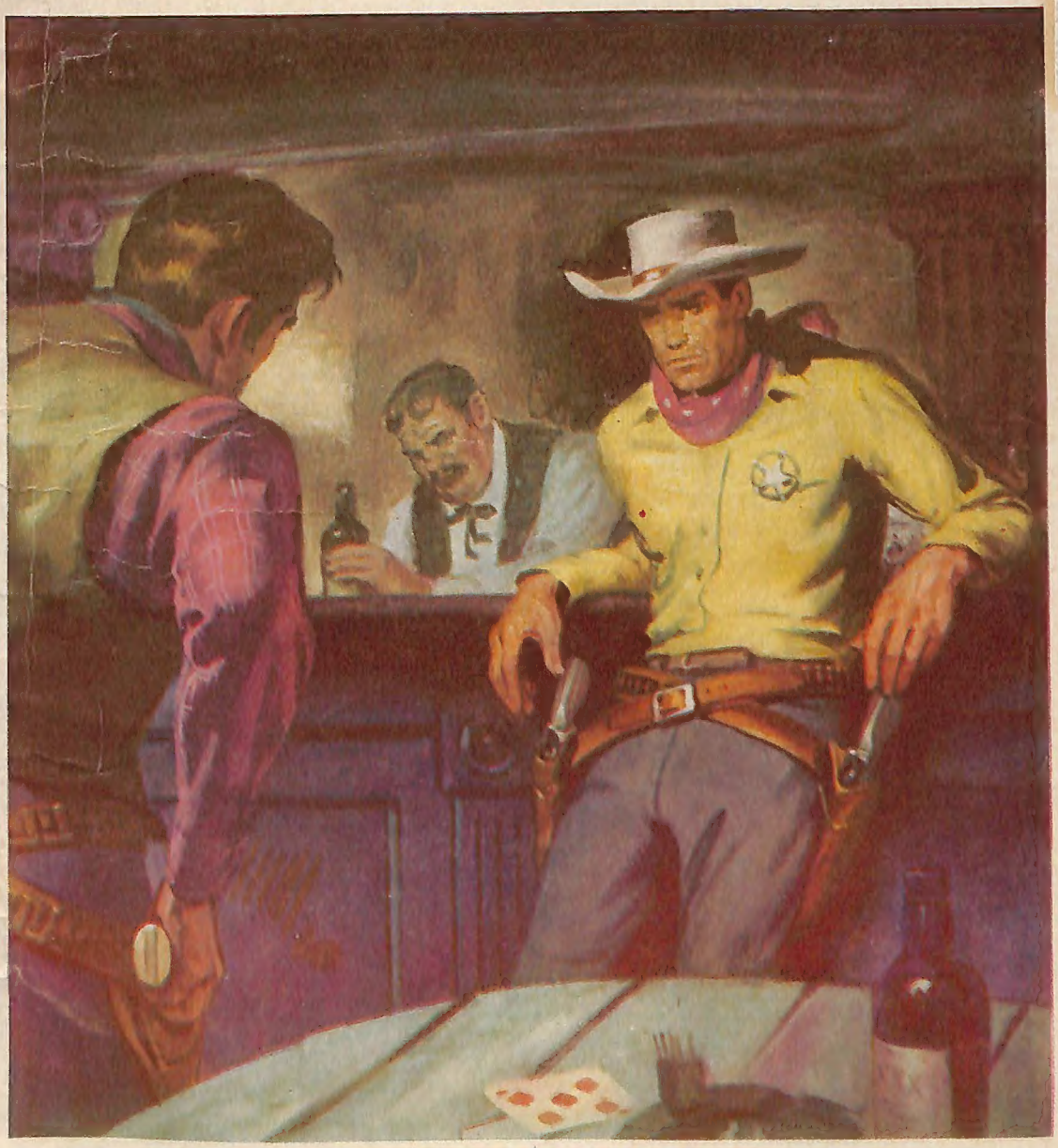
TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1957



FEATURING: **BOSS OF HANGNOOSE** By JACKSON COLE

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOL. 68, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER, 1957

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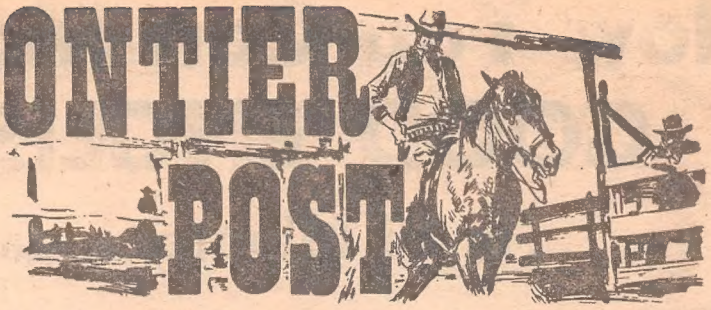

By CAPTAIN STARR

Fightin' Mike Meagher

IN THE SQUALID little cowtown of Caldwell, Kansas, perched on the edge of prairie, with no saving graces except its rowdiness and its everlastingly monotonous view of the immense ocean of grass that stretched in all directions, it was no wonder the Texas riders, up with their trail herds, should manufacture their own excitement.

But killings became so commonplace, so punctual and recurrent, and general lawlessness increased so rapidly, that scarcely a woman was safe from molestation or a man safe from robbery. Finally, the more sober element of Caldwell decided something had to be done about conditions.

There was a town marshal then, but he was neither the caliber nor the type to enforce anything more than lip-service to the law. Moreover, with such an obstacle to overcome as established vice and lawlessness, the question was not so much who would replace him, for there were many gunman aspirants to the job, as to who they could get who might live long enough to make order out of the vast chaos.

Several men were considered by the city council but none got the unanimous nod until the name of Mike Meagher, then marshal of Wichita, was mentioned. All councilmen were in favor of Mike, in spite of the fact that his services would come high. The unheard of salary of two hundred dollars a month seemed a fair price to pay for law and order again, especially when the little women at home were shrilling their heads off at every meal about the condition of Caldwell.

Mike Meagher, then, was offered the job. Mike was a stocky man with a ready smile, infectious wit—and a vicious .44

He came to Caldwell and took over. Never a bully, he calmed more wooly Texans by wit and sympathy when they were fleeced at the gaming tables or made ill by rotgut, than he ever shot. But there were always a few die-hards who mistook Mike's friendliness for unctiousness—and these Mike duly buried.

Mike was well liked even by the very men he ruled, and he took their badgering in good grace. But it dasn't all milk and honey, either. One night a fight broke out in the Trail Saloon. Mike went in alone, saw there was no chance to outshout enough of the fist and gun-barrel swingers to make them stop, so he knocked out four men in as many seconds, shot in the shoulder a cowman who drew on him and prodded the saloon owner into the forefront of the battle, making the man call off his roust-abouts and gamblers.

The fight stopped and Mike promptly marched the lot of them off to the calabozo, separated the wheat from the chaff and locked up the ones he felt were the most to blame. The rest were told to clear out of Caldwell and stay out until they were ready to act like gentlemen.

There was a cowman named Jim Talbot. Correctly, James Sherman Talbot. He ran a lot of cows and cut a wide swath wherever he went, and that included Caldwell. Arrogant, overbearing and powerful, Talbot ignored Mike's warning about brawling in town, was roughed up a little by

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

Mike when he picked his next fight and pulled out for his ranch a bruised, battered and thoroughly angered cowman.

Mike forgot about the incident as he did most of his battles, but Jim Talbot wasn't the forgetting kind. He let the humiliation simmer until it was like corroding acid inside of him, then he picked two hard-eyed riders who worked for him. Spears and Bigtree were their names. On second thought, he decided to go whole hog and also took his next toughest pair of gunhawks, Hill and Martin by name.

That looked liked good odds to Jim Talbot. He had all his men armed to the eyebrows and loaded for bear, when they saddled up and struck out for Caldwell. There was no advance information of their coming until they were entering the north end of town, then the word spread fast. Caldwell's citizens knew Talbot only too well.

Word went uptown to Mike fast. He listened soberly to the warning of the five killers, thanked the informant and started to gather up his rifle. Two men, Campwell and Stevens, both Texans and friends of longstanding of the marshal, from the days when he had backed them both down, said they were going along since the odds seemed 'a mite strong.'

Mike knew the temper of the men he was going up against, and went prepared. He gave both Stevens and Campwell carbines, then the trio stepped out to the middle of Caldwell's main drag and turned toward the Talbot crew, who were still on horseback watching them.

Caldwell held its breath as the three men afoot walked within easy pistol range of the five Talbot gunmen. Mike called out for Talbot to turn around and head back out of Caldwell and stay out!

That started it. Gun thunder shook Caldwell: Smoke obscured the three men afoot, and one of the horses of the Talbot crew broke, whirled wildly and went streaking back the way he had come in a bellydown run with a shouting, see-sawing rider trying unsuccessfully to stop him.

Spears was shot off his horse and killed in the first exchange of shots. He sprawled in the churned earth of the roadway and lay there for several hours after quiet had returned. When he was finally taken away it was to be dragged by the heels behind a mounted Texan.

Campwell was downed with a bad wound. Stevens remained standing, pumping his rifle until it was empty, then yanked his hand-gun and fell to with that.

Talbot's man Hill was shot badly and hung over his saddlehorn, unable to raise himself or fire the gun that sagged from his hand. Jim Talbot had dismounted after the first salvo, but Stevens' deadly shooting unnerved him. He flung himself back into the saddle and spun his horse just as Stevens' gun went empty.

Cursing crazily, Stevens swept up Campwell's pistol and resumed the fight, but Jim Talbot had had enough. He turned tail and fled. The lone Talbot man left, Martin, threw his gun down and his arms up. It was all over. Caldwell stormed out of stores and houses, roaring curses that made Martin change his mind in a flash, bend low, whirl his horse and dash away with a hail of lead to speed his departure.

Jim Talbot, in spite of his holdings in the Caldwell area, never returned. What became of him is not known to this day. He just disappeared, and it's just as well he didn't come back and try to salvage what he had left of his ranch and herds, because, like Martin, who sensed the fury of the populace, he only escaped a hangrope by the speed of his horse.

The fury of Caldwell was founded on one thing—a body that lay unmoving in the manure-stained roadway of Caldwell, Kansas. For Mike Meagher, the fighting Irishman whose deep understanding of humanity and unerring gun, a legend in the land, lay dead with a bullet through his heart. He was another of the brotherhood of gunfighters to make the final trip over the Great Divide, and probably the best liked of them all.

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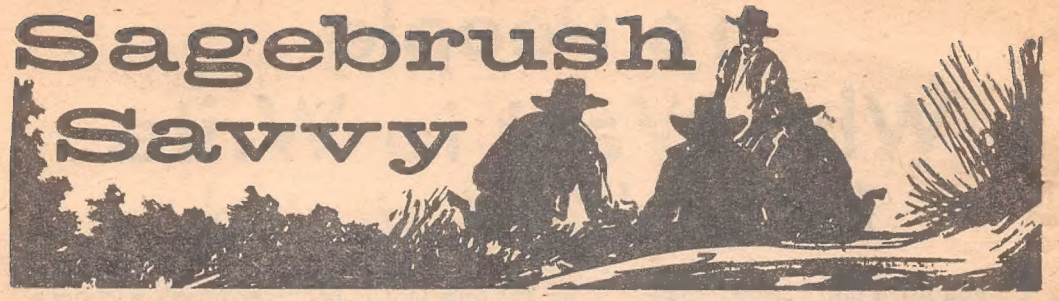
Sagebrush Savvy



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—(1) What is the Indian word for the cradle board an Indian mother carries her child in? (2) Is there a Smiley, Texas, and where did it get its name?—L.H.S. (Tenn.).

A.—(1) The common "straight package" type of Plains Indian cradle board for babies young enough to need to be strapped in has two projecting sticks, like handles, at the top, and its Cheyenne name is tah-chist (TAH-chist). Another type for older children is a triangular piece of heavy leather with a projecting rectangle at the bottom that has a long fold-over cloth sewed to it. The Cheyennes call this a ho-ka (HO-kay). I'll have Sioux and other tribal names for a later issue. (2) First shot in the Texas War for Independence was fired at Gonzales. Gonzales County, one of the state's oldest, was organized in 1837. Smiley—population about 1,000—is a poultry raising center in its southwest end about 63 miles southeast of San Antonio. It was named for a sheepman who grazed his flocks thereabouts around 100 years ago. Sorry I can't find any record of his first name or initials, but he was probably from Tennessee or Kentucky.

Q.—In speaking of cowtown buildings of the old West, what is meant by "false fronted?" —McP. (Idaho)

A—Many one-story business buildings in frontier towns were built with fronts, usually of plank, twice as high as the actual building. Since this made a one-story building appear to have two stories, it was called a false front. The added space was commonly used for the saloon's or business establishment's sign.

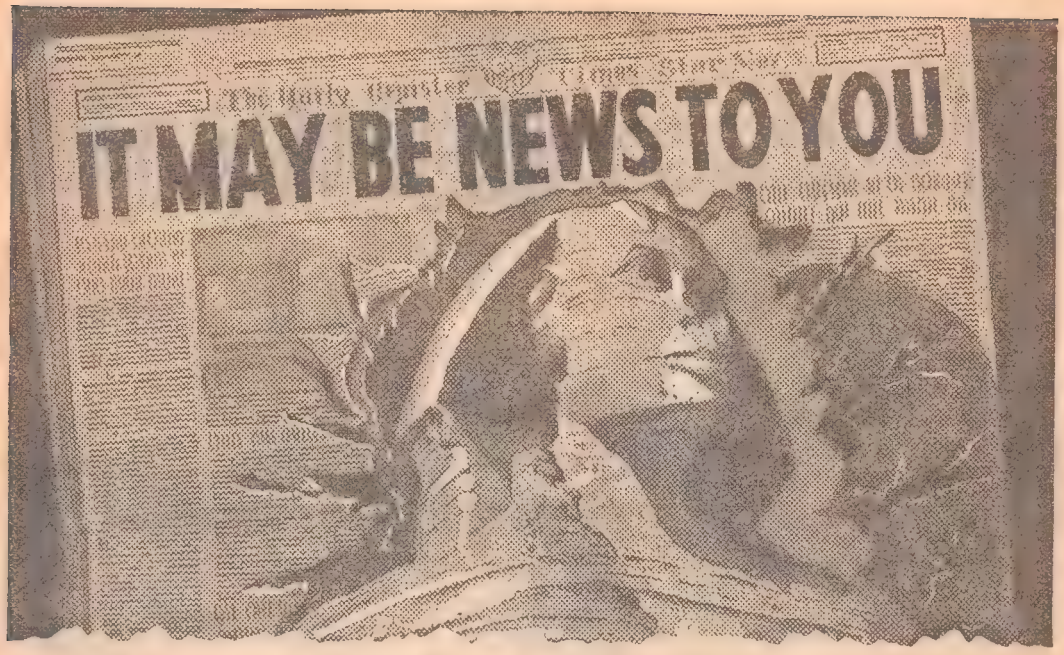
Q.—I have heard it said that Colorado and New Mexico were once a part of Texas, also that Texas was once a part of New Mexico. What about this?—A.J.K. (N. Mex.)

A.—Both claims are more or less correct. Coronado claimed a vast unexplored area of the Southwest for Spain in 1540, as the Province of New Mexico. Its vaguely established boundaries just about took in all outdoors, including present Arizona, New Mexico, southern Colorado and a big slice of west Texas. Also, some early Spanish and Mexican maps showed the Province of Texas extending westward to the Rio Grande all the way to its head, which would include part of New Mexico and Colorado. Texas still made some claim to this area after becoming an independent Republic, but did not make it stick. The Lone Star's present boundaries were established by treaty with Mexico and by agreement with the United States when Texas was admitted to the Union.

Q.—Who was the greatest of the old-time Texas trail drivers?—B.R.T. (Kans.)

A.—A dozen old-timers would probably give you a dozen different answers on that, but all would probably agree that a few of the great ones were Oliver Loving, Charles Goodnight, Shanghai Pierce, John Blocker, Ab Blocker, Ike Pryor, George W. Saunders, W. J. (One-Arm Bill) Wilson and maybe John S. Chisum.

—S. Omar Barker



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A
Jim Hatfield Novel

Boss of

By JACKSON COLE

Hangnoose

Buck Stringer, who ruled the killer pack in this high, far corner of Texas, sent down warning to the Lone Wolf — to keep out of Hangnoose or die!

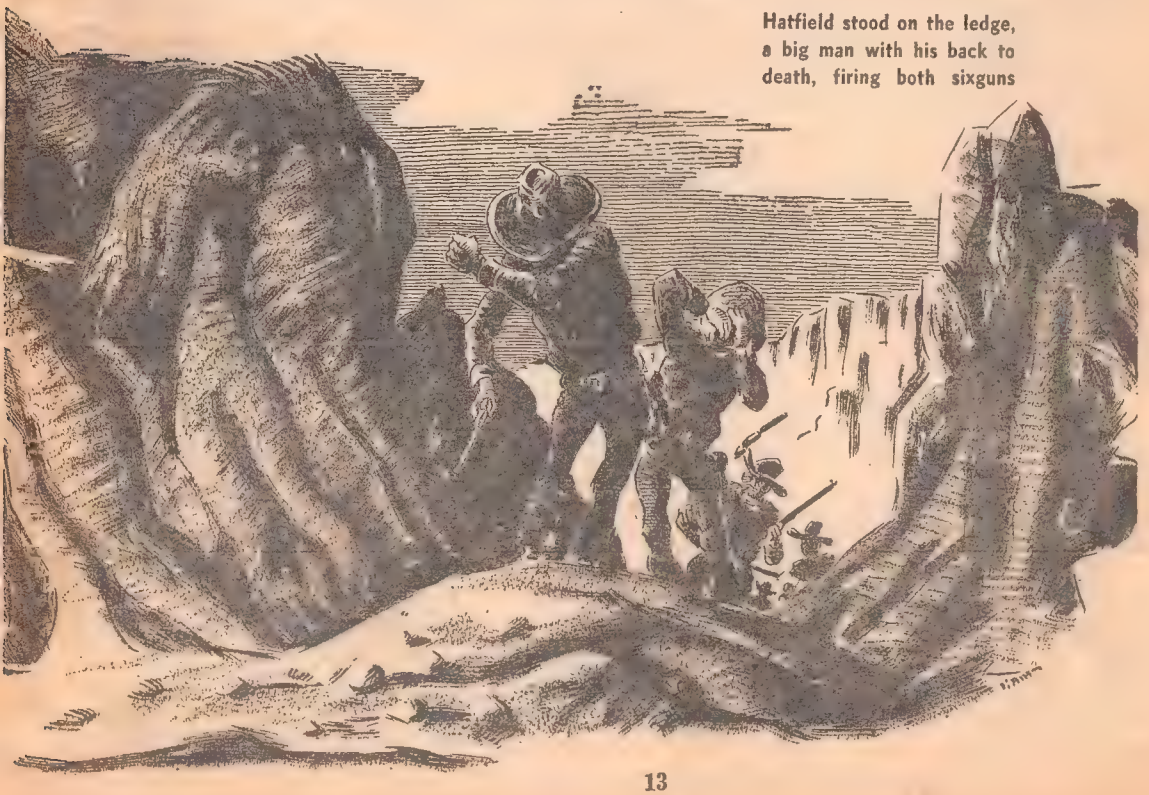
CHAPTER I

The Turning Point

RANGER Lee Stringer crumpled the letter in his fist and stared with bright, unseeing eyes across the boot-trampled street of the small Mexican border town. His partner, Dusty Collins, young, tow-headed and eager was watching a dark-eyed, hip-swaying señorita joggle by on the walk across the road.

His elbow dug into Stringer's side. "Hey, Lee. Take a gander at—"

The elbow seemed to trigger off a dark, wild temper in the tall Ranger. He wheeled and backhanded Dusty across the mouth before the eager youngster finished his remark. He spun Dusty against the building side and his right hand held a bone-handled Colt in it, all in the same savage burst of temper. The hammer



Hatfield stood on the ledge, a big man with his back to death, firing both sixguns

clicked back—then Lee caught himself and let his breath out in a slow, held-back sigh. His face was still white, lean and muscle-ridged, and his eyes had a deep dark hurt in them.

Dusty was pinned back against the wall. Surprise made its sharp imprint in his face. He brought the knuckles of his right hand up to wipe the blood from his chin and his tongue ran along the cut on his lip.

"Sorry, kid," Stringer said. The dark wildness faded from his gaze, leaving it sharp, cold, emotionless. He slid his Colt into his thonged down right holster and turned to stare bleakly at the few spectators who had been arrested by the abrupt, violent display of temper.

The spectators moved on, dismissed by Stringer's cold regard.

Lee Stringer turned back to Dusty who was bending, picking up his Stetson which had fallen off. "Just got some bad news, kid," he explained. But he did not elaborate on it, and he jammed the crumpled note he had just received into his pocket.

Dusty shrugged. "Reckon I shouldn't have jabbed you, Lee," he muttered. But he was hurt, and his tone was sullen. He was suddenly recalling the reputation of this Ranger, and some of his background.

Lee was of the Stringer clan who ruled Crown Basin up in the Tombstones. One of the wild bunch. He had a reputation as one of the fastest guns in Texas—he had been taught to handle a Colt from the cradle by his father, old Buck Stringer.

Dusty said: "It's all right, Lee," and started down the walk.

Stringer took two long strides and came alongside; he prodded the youngster's shoulder. "Hell, Dusty, don't go sour on me. You can take a poke at me, if it'll make you feel better."

Dusty paused, grinned. "Might take one at that, if I didn't think I'd bust my fist on that iron jaw of yours!" He laughed then and Lee grinned—but behind Stringer's grin was a dark, brooding hurt that Dusty caught and it made the younger man uneasy.

He was a big man, this Ranger—long and rangy, all gristle and muscle—a blond man who smiled a lot, but was quick to anger. He was tougher than steel, harder than the land he rode over, a man who had lived hard from the day he was born—a man who had joined the Rangers little more than a year ago and already was being regarded with the same awe as Jim Hatfield, Captain Bill McDowell's most capable troubleshooter.

He and Dusty were in Loma Linda, some twenty miles southeast of El Paso. They were headed north, on a mission. The message Lee had crumpled in his fist had been waiting in the small post office for him.

Whatever it was, Lee seemed to have shaken it—he clapped Dusty on the shoulder and said bluntly: "It's a long ride to Chuckawalla Wells, kid. Let's have a drink before we start."

Dusty frowned. Stringer was the senior man of this team and outside of the Lone Wolf, there was no Ranger Dusty thought more of. But there was a disquietingly reckless note in Stringer's tone.

Three drinks later they left Loma Linda for the Border Stageline Way Station at Chuckawalla Wells. . . .

THE border sun laid its rays in a long slant across the brown, sage-stippled land. It reflected like molten gold from the dirty windows of the stage stop.

Culver, the station tender, glanced at the Ranger badges Lee and Dusty showed him and nodded, relief brightening his pale gray eyes. He was a small, dried-up sort of man, with a white mustache blurring the hard lines of his mouth.

"She's due in here at sundown," he muttered. "Ben Nesbit's driving. Regular gun guard took sick at Apache Springs." He glanced at them. "Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money. There's men out here who'd kill for a fraction of that."

Dusty nodded. "We got orders to ride guard on her as far as Nogales. Reckon that twenty thousand's safe as in a bank, with Lee and me riding herd on it." There was a youngster's touch of bravado in his voice.

"Hope so," the station tender muttered.

Stringer's voice was curiously tight. "Any passengers?"

"Two. Man and wife, I hear."

Dusty turned to look at his partner, but Lee was staring off into the distance, toward the low sand hills flanking the stage road.

"Got beer on ice in back. Could you boys stand a drink?" Culver asked.

Dusty grinned. "And how!"

They followed the station man into the coolness of the long adobe building and sat at a table. Stringer was strangely quiet. He drank his beer and the passing moments sharpened the sense of withdrawal in Dusty.

"Must have been real bad news, Lee. Never saw you like this before," Dusty said.

Lee didn't even look at him. Culver came over with three more bottles and set them down on the table. He was settling his wiry frame on the bench when a dog began to bark excitedly.

"Reckon that's the stage," he said, relieved. "Tanker always lets me know when it tops the hill yonder."

JIM HATFIELD

He turned and headed for the door. Stringer came to his feet slowly, and now there was a bright and bitter look in his eyes.

The stage wheeled into the yard, raising a small cloud of whitish dust, and pulled up by the horse trough near the pole corral. The driver, a seamed, leathery individual with bright blue eyes, spat grit over the near front wheel.

Culver walked toward the stage, and he turned to wave to the two men behind him.

"Got a gun escort for you, Ben, from here on in. They're a couple of Rangers."

Ben's mouth cracked a grin through the alkali powdering his features. "Sure glad to have 'em. This box in the boot doesn't set easy."

The stage door opened as Culver was reaching for the handle. The station man stepped aside as a tall, nattily dressed man in long gray coat, white shirt and string tie stepped out. He turned immediately to help a smiling, full-figured girl down the iron step.

The girl paused on the step to stare with indifferent interest at the two men coming toward the coach. The smile froze on her face. Her features stiffened as though an icy wind had come out of nowhere, a dark horror entered her eyes.

She said, *"Lee!"* in a strangled, shocked voice.

The tall man with her whirled. He saw Stringer's tall striding figure and his right hand darted inside his coat. The girl spoke Lee's name again, just as a gun appeared in Stringer's hand and blasted heavily against the sundown silence.

They merged into one long blast of sound, all five shots. The passenger jerked

and twisted from the smash of lead and fell against the girl. And still the lead kept smashing into him.

The girl stared down at the man as he slid limply against the wheel. Ben was holding the reins with hard hand, keeping the team from stampeding. She stared down at the dead man, her face deathly white. Blood made an almost imperceptible stain against the dark brown of her taffeta travelling coat.

"Lee," she whispered, "you shouldn't—"

She licked her lips with the point of her tongue, and then her legs crumpled under her. She fell in an odd-shaped heap across the man by the wheel.

Ben was holding the team, staring at the savage bitterness in the tall blond Ranger's face. Culver was a man of stone, the shock of the violence still on him.

Dusty recovered first. "Lee! Damn it, Lee—"

Stringer whirled on him. It was a stranger who faced Dusty. A tall, deadly man with a warped grin on his face, a bleak bitter hate in his blue eyes.

"Don't try anything, kid!" he warned.

His left hand gun jerked and flamed as Dusty stabbed for his Colt. The young Ranger spun around and fell.

Lee turned away. He walked to the crumpled figures by the stage, looked down at them. A small hurt glinted through the dark fury in his gaze. Then he looked up at the driver, backing his grim order with the muzzle of his Colt.

"The strongbox, Ben. Throw it down!"

Ben obeyed. He watched silently as the Ranger shot the lock off the Wells Fargo box, and stuffed the money into his saddle bags. No one tried to stop him.

Stringer mounted his blaze-faced black. From the saddle he looked down at Dusty who was beginning to stir and relief made its brief recognition in him. He had not wanted to kill the young Ranger.

He rode up to the stage and tossed five twenties down at Culver's feet. "See that she gets a burial," he said. His voice was tight as a wound-up clock spring. "You can dump him," he added brutally, "into any desert hole!"

Stringer wheeled the big black then, sent it at a run out of the yard. Culver just stared. Ben made a grab for his rifle, but by the time he brought it to his shoulder the rider had dipped down into a shallow wash and was out of sight. He lowered it reluctantly and glanced at Culver.

Dusty was sitting up. The young Ranger's face was twisted with pain and his eyes were not clear. Blood made a glistening darkening patch around his bullet-torn shoulder.

Culver whirled on him, his outraged anger finding vent in his bitter declamation. "Ranger, eh? Damned killer, that's what he is! Worse than a lobo! Killed both of them in cold blood, and robbed the stage."

Dusty ignored the man's tirade. He hauled himself to his feet with grim effort, and staggered to the coach. He leaned against the front wheel and looked up into Ben's hard face.

"There's a wire office in Loma Linda. Get a message off to Ranger Captain Bill McDowell. Tell him Lee Stringer went crazy. Tell him to send Jim Hatfield. I'll be waiting here."

THE evening of the third day brought a rider up the trail to Chuckawalla Wells. He was a big man, wide-shouldered, flat-waisted, dusty from a long trail, yet he rode straight-backed and alert.

The sorrel stud he rode was big, too—a magnificent animal, sleek-muscled, deep-chested, intelligent.

They turned into the stage station yard and Tanker, a brindle mongrel, came around the far side of the corral, barking his greeting.

Culver stepped into sight in the barn doorway, a shotgun in his hands. He waited until the stranger turned the sorrel toward him—the muzzle held its unwavering regard on the big man—and he made his appraisal of the strong, sun-darkened features. He was dressed in the nondescript garb of the border country, this big rider, and there was the smell of sage and the look of far places in the level green eyes that met his. The big Peace-

makers in thonged-downed holsters were a grim and naked warning, but there was no danger in the man's white-toothed smile.

"I'm Jim Hatfield," he announced quietly. "You have a Ranger named Dusty Collins here!"

Culver nodded, sucking his breath in sharply. "Yeah, sure have," he said and slid his shotgun down and set it against the barn wall. He glanced again at the big rider, noting the odd green of his eyes. He took a slow breath as he walked across the yard to the adobe building, and thought, *The Lone Wolf—Captain McDowell's ace troubleshooter!*

He made a short motion inside. "This way, Hatfield."

He led Jim to a back room where Dusty lay propped up in bed, his shoulder swathed in bandages. "He's had a fever for the last two nights," Culver remarked, "but he's been better today."

Dusty's grin was weak. "Sit down, Jim," he invited, waving with his free hand to a chair.

The Lone Wolf settled his hard-muscled frame into the seat. "McDowell said Lee Stringer turned lobo, Dusty. What's the story?"

Dusty told him what had happened. "It must have had something to do with the letter he got in Loma Linda," he muttered. "Lee was wound up tight as a drum when we got here."

Jim leaned back, frowning. He had been in Austin when word had reached Ranger headquarters; Captain McDowell had called him in and given him Dusty's message.

The old Ranger Captain's orders had been grimly specific: "Bring Lee in, Jim—dead or alive." And then McDowell had added somewhat self-consciously, "I know you liked him, Jim. But we can't let this thing drop. Whatever reasons Lee Stringer had for turning killer are not for us to determine. He'll have to stand trial for what he did. We can't let people think that just because he was a Ranger he can do something and not be punished."

Jim had nodded coldly. "I'll bring him in, Bill."

He was thinking of this and the train ride from Austin to the border stopover where he had taken Goldy from the baggage car for the ride here. But even the ride had not lessened his distaste for the job ahead.

"Who were the passengers Lee killed?" he asked, turning to Culver.

The station tender shook his head. "Near as I could make out the man was a gambler name of Slick Mason. Leastwise he had a couple of letters in his pocket addressed to a man by that name." Culver's eyes darkened as he probed back into his memory. "They were from someone in New Orleans—addressed to Slick Mason, care of Shawlee's Store, Tombstones."

Dusty licked his lips. "Tombstones! That Stringer's country, ain't it, Jim. Old Buck Stringer and his Horseshoe outfit?"

Jim ignored the question. His gaze was on Culver. "And the girl?"

"Nothing." Culver made a gesture. "She was booked as his wife. I found no identification on her."

"Coroner from Stanley said to bury them," Dusty added thinly. "He's got their personal effects in his office. You want to check on them?"

Jim stood up. "I don't think so." His voice was quiet. "Lee's got a three day start, Dusty. But I think I know just where he's headed."

Jim said goodbye to the young Ranger and went out. Culver followed him to the door, watched the Lone Wolf get into saddle of the big sorrel. He waved briefly.

"A long trail," Culver muttered. "I wouldn't want to be in either man's shoes. He's hell on wheels, that big Ranger—but that's Buck Stringer's country up there, in the Tombstones."

CHAPTER II

Ambush At Shawlee's

BROKEN CROWN was a towering wall of limestone rimming Crown Basin. It made a semi-circle with one end

anchored to the grim and desolate Tombstones and the other petering out in Mexico. For one hundred miles only two breaks gave access to the almost unknown country behind it. One was at North Pass, rising above Tortilla Flats. The other was at the border.

The shadow of the wall crept down across the talus slide at its base as the blazing sun dipped westward. It reached with silent fingers over the squat ugly stone structure clinging like a stubborn wart to that dry and desolate slope. The air was furnace hot and the vanes of the wind pump hung still. In the small corral below two saddled horses hugged the shade of a pepper tree.

On the other side of the corral, in plain view of anyone coming through North Pass, a trim roan gelding hitched to a buggy, tugged impatiently at reins looped over one of the corral bars. The gelding had been here since morning.

Inside the comparative coolness of the squat structure Shawlee leaned his elbows on the short, unpainted bar top and stared stonily at the two men and the girl sitting at the table by the outside wall. It was none of his business, he kept telling himself. But anger kept rising in him.

The girl sat very quiet, looking down at the table. There was a livid bruise on her cheek where Vince Stringer, the tall, bald, leathery-faced man had slapped her. Shawlee didn't like to see a girl hurt. But she was Vince Stringer's niece, and it was none of his business.

Ed Bawley, the shorter, bull-necked Hangnoose rider finished his third beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was a muscular, arrogant man in his early twenties who handled a gun well enough to work for Hangnoose. He needed a shave. He was not a patient man, and it had been all of two hours since they had walked in on the girl. Now he pushed his empty glass aside and got up and walked to the door. He squinted across the rising slant of sun-beaten ground toward the bulk of Broken Crown where North Pass made an irregular crack in the wall.

"Damn him!" he swore harshly. "Maybe he got cold feet. Maybe he was just givin' her a time."

"He'll come!" Vince Stringer said shortly. "He's just young enough, an' fool enough, to think he can get away with it!"

Bawley glanced at the girl. She was young and slim and she looked Mexican. She was seventeen and as much a woman as she would ever be. And Bawley figured that was plenty of woman.

He wiped his lips again, but there was a different look in his eyes. Damn Buck Stringer, he thought. Some day the old he-wolf would have to let some man take her.

The flash of reflected sunlight hit the side of the door and he turned quickly, squinting at the rim of the wall. It was close to a thousand yards to the point above the Pass; he couldn't make out the man behind the signalling mirror. But he knew it was Slim Meeker.

"He's comin', Vince!"

The girl stiffened. Her body trembled and the man beside her put his hand on her shoulder, his fingers tightening cruelly. "Don't make a sound, and don't move."

He glanced up sharply at Bawley, standing in the doorway. "Get back in here!" he yelled. "If he spots you he'll spook."

Bawley came back to the table. He didn't sit down. He leaned back against the stone wall, his palm resting on the walnut handle of his Colt.

Across the room Shawlee said bluntly, "Take your fightin' away from here."

He was a tall, spare-framed man with a thatch of white hair over a narrow, Indian dark face. He was part Crow, and there was that air of quiet dignity in him.

Vince eyed him with thin patience. "Just tend to your own business," he reminded. "This ain't none of your affair."

Shawlee's mouth tightened. He had a wife and a daughter in the back room, he didn't want trouble. Not with Hangnoose.

Vince turned to the girl. "You'll learn the hard way, Rosalie. Nobody leaves Crown Basin without your father's sayso. Not even his daughter!"

The girl lifted her eyes from the table. Her face was pale. "He's the only man who ever treated me nice," she whispered. "You can't kill him for that."

"Treated you real nice, all right," Bawley sneered. "Only man who ever got to—"

"Shut up!" Vince said viciously. Bawley's lips crimped with sullen anger, but he kept a rein on his temper. The sixty-year old Stringer was no slouch with that southpaw draw.

"Treated you so well you decided to run off with him," Vince said. "You're just like that tramp sister-in-law of yours!" His laughter had an ugly edge. "An' you know what happened to her."

"It wasn't her fault," Rosalie Stringer said with weak defiance. "She'd never have run off with—"

Her voice smothered as Vince suddenly clasped a hand over her mouth. He stood up, dragging her with him. "Reckon he's coming, Ed," he said coldly. "We'll wait until he pulls up at the rack."

JIM HATFIELD measured the dark cut of North Pass as he pulled Goldy aside to let him blow. The Lone Wolf had given the big sorrel little rest since they had left Chuckawalla Wells four days ago —nor had he spared himself.

He felt the hot dry miles weigh on him as he slacked in saddle and reached inside his shirt pocket for the makings. He had come across half of Texas to bring to justice a man he had once called friend. Now, as he surveyed the towering wall ahead he felt a vague distaste for what he had to do.

He had worked with Lee Stringer two or three times in the past two years; he had come to like the lean, hard youngster with the quick smile. He had made a good partner on those occasions, although Hatfield had sensed something dark and secret in the man that at times had turned him to brooding.

Whatever Lee Stringer had kept bottled in himself had finally turned him into a killer and holdup man.

"He knows I'm after him, Goldy," the Lone Wolf murmured. "It won't be easy to take him."

Goldy snorted softly, as if he understood. There was this bond between them, fused through years of danger, nurtured by the flames of a thousand lonely campfires. He felt Hatfield shift his weight forward in saddle, and the big sorrel moved on without further urging.

Behind him Tortilla Flats baked in the sun. The town of Rincon, squalid and inconsequential, was lost behind a fold in the tawny earth. Though the Stringers ruled behind Broken Crown, their iron influence reached as far as Rincon and men had been sullen to Jim's questions. A hardbitten teamster had finally answered Jim's question, measuring the Lone Wolf with bold stare.

"You'll find the old ruts of a wagon track southwest of here. Follow them an' they'll lead you to North Pass."

Jim suddenly spun his cigaret into the brush. From the rim above the Pass a light flashed and winked. And though it was in no code understandable to the Lone Wolf, a hard smile touched his lips.

"Reckon we're expected," he muttered, and a cool alertness sloughed the drag of long miles from him.

He was coming up the last mile to the squat stone structure he knew must be Shawlee's, and he put his gaze on that lonely outpost, knowing that trouble, if it came, would come from inside that store.

Up on Broken Crown, Meeker, a slim, cold-eyed man slid the small mirror into his pocket and put a pair of field glasses to his eyes. He watched Hatfield come up out of a small draw and head for Shawlee's, then he turned and waved to the big, hump-shouldered figure behind him. The man came up and took the glasses from Meeker and studied the rider on the big sorrel.

"The boys can handle Coley," Meeker said. "But what about him?"

Mel Stringer chuckled. He had a bony, swarthy face that looked as though it had been stepped on while it was still plastic. There was a coarse brutality in his yellowish eyes and thick, sensual lips and a

cruel anticipation twitched his mouth as he studied the rider below.

"Lee said he'd come," he muttered.

"Who?"

Mel acted as though he hadn't heard. "Long shot for that Winchester of yours," he said. "We'll see what I can do with my old buffalo gun."

FLIES buzzed drowsily before the open door as the Lone Wolf drew up to the sagging, untenanted rack. He sat loose, a big, hard man who had learned to smell danger a mile away.

It was too quiet here. He put his glance on the buggy tied to the near corral poles and noticed the portmanteau bag in the small bed. A yellow-brown dog came around the far corner of the corral and paused.

Vince Stringer's tall, stooped figure suddenly appeared in the doorway. He stepped out fast, pulling the girl with him —then he brought up short, his fingers tight on his Colt butt, and a surprised curse spilled from him.

Ed Bawley appeared behind Vince. The light of deadly anticipation faded from his eyes; a quick, suspicious scowl streaked his unshaven features. He glanced up at the rim, wondering if Meeker had signaled for this man—then he pushed past Vince, to the edge of the railless veranda and measured the dusty rider on the big sorrel.

"Who in hell are you?"

Jim frowned. It came to him that these men were surprised to see him. And not pleased. At least the two men were not.

He looked at the girl who had made no sound, uttered no cry, although the rough handling by the leathery-faced oldster must have hurt. He saw the bruise on her face and sensed the terror in her that numbed her to physical pain.

Bawley repeated his question with ugly impatience.

Temper nagged at Hatfield's tired nerves. It looked as though he had stumbled into something that was none of his business. But he didn't like Bawley's tone, nor did he warm to men who maltreated women.

"Might be it's none of your business," he said softly.

Bawley tensed. But a sudden caution gripped him, held his gun hand. There was a sudden bleak and unswerving look in the stranger's cool green eyes that unsettled him. He glanced at Vince and licked dry, cottony lips.

Impatience was pushing the older man. He didn't want trouble with this hard-looking stranger, but Coley Prindle would be coming through North Pass at any moment.

"Maybe it ain't," he answered for Bawley. "But if you're not lookin' for trouble, get to hell out of here."

Jim's hands were on his pommel. The girl had backed away from Vince and was staring toward the Pass and the hard thought came to Hatfield that these men were waiting for someone to come through that steep-walled cut. Someone that meant a lot to this slim girl.

"Could be advice you and Loud Mouth should take," he murmured. "I've come too far to turn back now. If you—"

He didn't get to finish. The girl suddenly flattened against the rough stone wall and uttered a shrill, piercing cry. And simultaneous with her cry a Sharps .50 caliber slug raked across Jim's back, ricocheted off the stone a scant foot beyond the girl and whined into the hot stillness.

The bullet tipped the Lone Wolf in saddle and he kept going, sliding in a smooth twisting fall that brought him between Goldy and the men on the veranda. Vince was drawing as Jim fell, Bawley, stepping away to clear his partner, was bringing up his Colt.

Jim's first shot smashed Vince's arm. The Hangnoose gunman fell back and into Bawley's line of fire. The bull-necked gunster's slug burned across his side, twisting him around. Bawley thumbed two more fast shots before Hatfield's bullets doubled him up.

Vince was down on his knees, clawing for his gun with his right hand when the girl ran between him and Hatfield. She

caught Goldy's pommel and swung aboard. The big sorrel reared up and the Sharps on the wall sent another slug screaming past, tearing a chunk from the veranda support.

Impulse rode the Lone Wolf. "Go, Goldy!" he commanded.

The golden stallion whirled like a mountain goat, the girl clinging to saddle. He went at a run for the dark cut of North Pass. . . .

Vince Stringer got his fingers on his Colt when Hatfield's heel ground down on his hand. He gave a sharp cry and tried to bite at Jim's leg. The Lone Wolf booted the Colt off the veranda, dragged Vince to his feet and shoved him through the open door.

He paused to look toward North Pass. The Sharps on the rim was silent. But the thinner spang of a Winchester carbine filled in. Hatfield saw the dust spurt up close to the big stallion. Then Goldy and his slim rider vanished into the shadows of the Pass.

CHAPTER III

"Stay out of the Tombstones, Hatfield!"

THE Lone Wolf backed through the doorway and whirled as a flat voice snapped: "Against the wall, *compadre.* Stay there!"

He was still holding his Colt and he threw a look over his shoulder, a reckless urge riding him. He saw Shawlee standing slack against the support of his bar. The muzzles of the 12 gauge sawed-off shotgun looked ugly—they had a cold finality that stopped Hatfield.

Vince Stringer was hugging the inside wall next to the door, holding his bullet torn arm. Pain made a bright wet glitter of his eyes.

"I told you Hangnoose men to keep your fighting away from here," Shawlee said tightly. "When you come through North Pass you're on my territory, Vince!"

The old gunster made a thin hacking sound between his teeth. "It's your land because we let you keep it, Shawlee! You dam fool! After this—"

"My land!" the stony-faced storekeeper repeated. "I'll keep it!" He put his dark, piercing stare on Jim. "Who are you?"

Hatfield relaxed. "Just a hombre who chanced to ride up to your place at the wrong time, looks like," he said. "I'm not a Stringer man, if that helps."

Shawlee's gaze held a defiant glitter. "Wouldn't matter any," he muttered. He threw a wary glance through the doorway. "What happened out there? Where's Ed Bawley? And the girl?"

"Bawley was a shade too slow," Jim answered levelly. "The girl got away on my horse." His glance narrowed on the tall, spare man. "Was she kin of yours?"

"Not my kin," Shawlee denied coldly. "His."

Vince forced a sneer between his clenched teeth. "You're lucky you only lost your horse, fellow. Ride through North Pass an' you'll be dead before the sun sets!"

"I'll take my chances on it," Jim growled. He looked at Shawlee who was scowling at both of them. "Might be a good idea to patch him up," he suggested. "He's messing up your floor."

Shawlee eyed Jim with cold disapproval. "Might be a better idea if you set those irons of yours over on that table. Nice and easy and gentle like."

Jim grinned. "We'll compromise, fellow." He slid his Peacemaker back into holster and raised his hands shoulder high. "I'm peaceful. The fight wasn't of my making, Shawlee."

The storekeeper kept his shotgun. But he raised his voice in loud summons. "Maria!"

At the second call a fat Mexican woman appeared at the curtained-off inner room beyond the bar. She listened impassively to Shawlee's Mexican orders and disappeared.

Jim said quietly, "Mind if I take a look outside? The jaspers on the ridge might have decided to come down and see what bad shots they were."

Shawlee smiled.

"They wasn't after you!" Vince snarled. "But if Mel an' Slim took it into their heads to come down you'd soon wish you'd taken my advice!"

Jim ignored him. He walked to the door and glanced outside. The road to the canyon cut was empty. The rim of Broken Crown showed no movement. Bawley lay sprawled just off the veranda, his gun still clutched in his hand. The yellow-brown dog had come up and was sniffing at the body.

Jim eased away from the doorway. Shawlee's wife had come back and was placing a pitcher of water, carbolic salve and bandages on the table. She looked at Shawlee who made a curt gesture with the shotgun. "I'd do it for anybody, Vince. Get over there! Maria'll fix your arm."

Vince walked to the chair and slumped down on it, laying his arm on the table. The woman used a sharp kitchen knife to slit the sleeve up to Vince's shoulder, and pulled the blood soaked cloth away from the ugly bullet hole. She worked swiftly and efficiently.

When she was through Shawlee came over. "Think you can ride back?" His voice lacked curiosity.

Vince got to his feet. His face was paler than usual; the ingrained dirt in the lines in his face stood out plainly.

"For this I'll forget what you said, Shawlee," Vince muttered grudgingly. "But I'll be back. With Mel an' a couple of the boys." He put his hard, stubborn stare on Hatfield. "If you're still here—"

Jim smiled faintly. "I won't be," he promised coldly.

Vince misunderstood. "We'll be around, to make sure." He looked at Shawlee. "Bawley's an' my horses are out back. If you'll give me a hand with Ed, I'll get him back to the spread."

Hatfield walked to the rear door with him. A steeldust mare with a mean look jerked at her reins beside a meeker looking roan gelding. Jim made his choice. "Leave the steeldust," he said shortly. "I'm riding her."

The Hangnoose man paused. He looked at Hatfield, his eyes narrowing. Then he shrugged.

"Reckon it's a fair swap. Your sorrel stud for the steeldust."

"No swap," the Lone Wolf said bleakly. "Just a temporary loan. I'll get Goldy back."

Vince sneered. He pulled himself into the roan's saddle, gathered up the reins he had loosened with his right hand. Jim walked around the building to the front with him, keeping a few paces behind the man.

Shawlee was standing by Bawley's body, waiting. Vince edged the suddenly skittish roan close and Jim gave Shawlee a hand with the gunman's body. They lifted him across Vince's saddle and the Lone Wolf raised his glance to the rim of Broken Crown.

There was no movement to be seen on the ridge.

Vince settled in saddle. "I'm a fair man," he muttered. "Reckon Ed an' me did kind of force your hand, stranger. But don't push your luck too far. Don't be here when we come back!"

The Lone Wolf put his back against the porch support and hooked his thumb in his cartridge belt. "I didn't come looking for trouble," he said slowly. "Only for one man. I won't be here when you come back, Vince. Because I'll be in the Basin, looking for him."

Vince stared down at Jim, a grimness streaking his pale face. "Lookin' for who?"

"Lee Stringer!"

The old man suddenly inhaled, a sharp, gusty intake of breath. His eyes flared. "Lee? Then you're—"

"Jim Hatfield. Texas Ranger."

Vince seemed to sag a little. A grudging respect tinged the cold enmity in his eyes; he licked his lips in unconscious tribute to this tall, dusty Ranger whose prowess had extended beyond even Broken Crown.

"We been expecting you," he said meagerly. "I'll tell Buck you're comin'!"

Jim nodded. He watched Vince pull the roan away and send him at a gallop toward the deep shadows of North Pass.

The Lone Wolf lifted Rosita from her saddle just before the dying horse fell

SHAWLEE stood framed in his doorway, the shotgun tucked under his arm. The tawny dust hung in the air behind the roan's hoofs and the smell of it came to irritate his nostrils. He felt the dry sapping heat that clung like an invisible fog over the outpost with the unconcern of a man who had lived with it most of his life. He stood tall and erect, eyeing the big Ranger with a sort of detached wonder.

The Lone Wolf was occupied with his own grim thoughts. He had not wanted trouble, nor had he planned to take on Hangnoose when he had left Captain Bill McDowell, in Austin.

The Ranger Captain had wanted to send a company of Rangers with Jim Hatfield, into the Tombstones, but the Lone Wolf had demurred.

"Buck Stringer could round up half a hundred men if he heard we were coming," Jim had said. "It would be war from the minute we rode through Broken Crown—and it would be on his own territory, Bill!"

"Roaring Bill" McDowell growled, "It'll be war anyway you look at it, Jim. That old he-wolf won't turn Lee over to you just because you ask him to."

"Maybe not," Jim had admitted. "But I can't figure Lee turning killer and hold-up man. If I can find out why he did it, I might be able to talk him into riding back with me to stand trial."

Captain McDowell had snorted at this. "Have it your way, Jim," he had finally said. "You generally know what you're doing. But if you get in a jam up there, get word back to me. I'll have the whole damn outfit to back you—and damn the consequences!"

Now Hatfield looked toward North Pass with brooding doubt. He knew little of the Stringer clan, other than that old Buck Stringer ramrodded a wild bunch who were suspected of many things, from border rustling to fomenting revolution across the Mexican line. The wild and trackless country behind Broken Crown was his territory, and in it Buck Stringer's word was the only law.

Behind him Shawlee said wonderingly, "Are you Hatfield? The Ranger they call the Lone Wolf?"

Jim turned and nodded. Standing here in the scant shade cast by the rickety wooden awning he felt small and diminished by the towering wall beyond—he felt tired and a vague irritation tightened his lips.

"What was the trouble here?" he asked curtly.

Shawlee's face was impassive. "Stringer trouble. Man you killed was Ed Bawley, one of the Stringer bunch. Vince is Buck Stringer's brother. They run this part of Texas."

Jim smiled thinly as he walked toward Shawlee. "Do they run this place, too?"

"No one runs Shawlee," the gray-headed man said. He moved back into the comparative coolness of the store and waved to the long wooden table by the wall. "Are you hungry?"

Jim shrugged. "Might be, after a bottle of cold beer." He walked to the table and sat down and Shawlee came over with the bottle and a glass. He stood across the table, watching Hatfield.

"That was Rosita Stringer who took your bronc," he said. "Buck Stringer's girl."

Jim poured. The news surprised him, but he was not overly interested in the pattern of trouble he had walked into. "I didn't know Buck had a girl," he said quietly. "Heard he wasn't partial to having women on Hangnoose."

Shawlee sat down across from Jim. "Buck's first wife died right after Lee Stringer was born. He married his Mexican housekeeper. Or, maybe he didn't marry her. But she lives up there as his wife. Rosita is their daughter."

Jim frowned. "That buggy tied up outside, is it hers?"

Shawlee nodded. "From what I heard she was running away with one of her father's riders. A kid named Coley Prindle."

Hatfield drank his beer. It explained what he had run into here. He thought of the girl, slim and young and frightened—afraid for the man who was to have joined her here. Perhaps she had gotten back through the Pass in time to warn him.

"Buck Stringer must have gotten wind of it," Shawlee said. "Vince and Bawley got here about an hour ago. They must have had somebody up on Broken Crown waiting to signal them as soon as Coley started through the Pass."

"They treated her pretty rough," Jim commented coldly. "Reckon Buck Stringer isn't filled with love for his daughter."

Shawlee's dark face held a wooden reserve. "Buck Stringer never loved anyone in his life," he said slowly. "Not even his children. He runs them with an iron fist. Until today, Lee Stringer was the only one who bucked him, and went down into Rincon town an' married an outsider. She was a waitress who worked in the Cozy Corner Lunch. He brought her back to Crown Basin and six months later she ran off."

Jim leaned forward, suddenly interested. "Lee was married?"

Shawlee frowned. "Sure, to a girl named Milly. She ran off with a gambler named Slick Mason." He got up and walked behind his bar and returned with another bottle of beer and a glass. He poured himself a drink and pushed the bottle to Jim. "I heard rumors old Buck Stringer was behind that, arranged it. He didn't want Lee tied to any woman."

Jim lifted the cool beer to his lips. "What happened to Lee?"

"Took it hard," Shawlee answered. "He left the Basin right after. I heard he searched for her for two years." He hesitated, his eyes dark and brooding, not looking at Jim. "Lee Stringer came through here two days ago, a changed man. He was always the best of the Stringers. He didn't have his brother's mean streak, nor his father's wild temper. I asked him if he had found his wife." Shawlee shrugged. "He didn't say a word. He left a near dead animal in my corral an' borrowed one of mine."

Jim put his glass down on the table. "He found her," he murmured, and he was thinking that he understood Lee a little better now.

Shawlee rose. He stood by the table as his wife brought Hatfield a plate of enchiladas and frijoles and tortillas. "I heard Lee killed her," he said slowly. "Is that true?"

Jim nodded.

Shawlee's face was wooden. He moved away, toward the bar, and Jim eyed him with curiosity. "You knew Lee's wife?"

Shawlee shrugged. "I was the one who wrote to Lee," he said slowly. "I thought he would—" He groped for words, and ended lamely. "I didn't think he'd kill her."

"I'm sorry he did," Jim said. "He also killed the man she was with, and shot a Ranger. And stole twenty thousand dollars he had been entrusted to guard."

Shawlee's eyes held a bitter amazement. "He used to come here, often. Before he went away. He was different from the others."

How different? Jim thought coldly. Lee was a Stringer, brought up in an atmosphere of violence. When the time came he had reacted like a Stringer.

He ate without much hunger, although he had not eaten since early morning. Shawlee brooded behind his bar. He seemed to take the responsibility for Milly's death as his own.

The shadow of Broken Crown stretched far down the slant of tawny earth toward Tortilla Flats, no breeze stirred the heat of the dying afternoon.

The Lone Wolf left money on the table and walked to the door. He eyed the towering wall with brooding regard as he slowly pinned his badge on his dusty shirt.

There was no need now to hide the fact he was a Ranger. Lee must have guessed, but when Vince got back they'd all know!

Shawlee joined him. The dark-faced breed eyed that symbol of authority on Jim's shirt—the lone star circled by a gleaming band of silver. It seemed out of place in this country, that symbol of law and order, a worthless bit of bright metal. But the tall, wide-shouldered man with the strange green eyes gave it stature—almost, Shawlee hesitated, gave it meaning.

Again he groped for words. "You're a brave man, Señor Hatfield. But if you value your life, stay out of the Tombstones!"

Jim didn't answer him. He only half heard Shawlee; he was thinking of what lay beyond that barrier. He was thinking, too, of Goldy, and the young, frightened girl who rode him.

"Men come and go through North Pass," Shawlee muttered. He seemed to be talking mostly for himself. "They pause here for a beer, sometimes to eat. I hear many things. Buck Stringer has something big planned. Something to do with Cardona, the Mexican rebel."

Jim turned to look at him, caught by something in Shawlee's tone. "How big?"

The breed shrugged. "That I do not know. But whatever it is, he will not let you interfere. If you ride through that Pass they'll kill you, Ranger."

"They'll try," the Lone Wolf said coldly. He smiled then, and the harsh planes of his face softened. He put out his hand. "Thanks for everything, Shawlee. But it's time I was riding."

Shawlee watched him mount the steeldust Vince had left behind. He answered Jim's brief wave. Of all the men who had come and gone in the years he had been here, he had met none like this one. Something bitter made its bad taste in his mouth, a premonition. Some day he would hear news—the Lone Wolf was dead!

CHAPTER IV

Buck Stringer

LEE STRINGER stared moodily from the veranda of the ranchhouse. Around him were the flimsily built outbuildings, *ramadas* mostly, designed to protect from the brutal border sun and little more. Even the ranchhouse, sprawling and ugly, had not been built with an eye toward permanency. Hangnoose was a camp which could be burned out without impairing the power of Buck Stringer or greatly inconvenience him.

As far as Lee could see the land was

bare and barren, breaking against the high mesa country which hid the canyon cut of the Rio Grande. It was a grim and uninhabited stretch of Texas, tenanted only by fugitives and scum of both border countries.

Lee Stringer stood against the bleached porch support and watched the sun go down over the ragged Tombstones. He had not shaved for days and his hair was shaggy on his neck. He seemed caught in a miasma of inactivity, it was as though he could not will even the simplest act. From the day he had killed Slick Mason and the girl who had been his wife, Lee had lived in a bad dream. He had fled here where he had been born, not knowing why, impelled by some obscure homing instinct.

Deep inside him he knew it had been a mistake to come back. The things which had driven him from Hangnoose were still here, and the memories of the woman he had killed were here, too. He felt mortally sick down deep inside him—he knew he lacked the will to recover.

He shaped himself a cigaret from habit and over the match flame he studied the far barrier of Broken Crown. Hatfield would be coming from that way, he knew, and a dark and brooding sense of destruction welcomed it.

The screen door slammed behind him and his father and a stumpy, ragged Mexican came out. The Mexican wore a cartridge bandolier over his shoulder and carried an old carbine in his hand. He was mostly Yaqui, stolid, still overwhelmed by the power of the weapon he owned. He was a member of Cardona's ragged rebel army which, Lee knew, was nothing more than a motley raiding crew.

The Mexican cast a dark, arrogant look at Lee as he went down the steps, caught up the reins of a shaggy, brown pony and rode away.

Buck Stringer watched him go, then moved to his youngest son. Buck was not a big man, but he gave the impression of bigness. He stood several inches shorter than Lee, but he was half again as broad. There was a thick, ponderous, unstoppable quality in this mahogany-hued man with the iron gray mustache, pale blue eyes, and blunt, scarred chin which made its impression on even the casual acquaintance.

Buck Stringer had come to the Tombstones at twenty-two—he had a price on his head even then. He had been riding with Quantrill from the age of sixteen, and he had learned to kill early. In this back border country of vast distances, canyon breaks and mesas, he had found what he wanted.

He was a generous man, as long as he was obeyed. Money meant little to him, except its acquisition and the power money gave him. Even his sons didn't know how much money he had locked in the iron safe in his cubbyhole office.

But he paid wages to twenty riders—and his intrigues reached into a dozen border towns and into Chihuahua. Beyond Broken Crown he was the only law, and Texas be hanged!

Standing beside his son, he sensed what was in Lee. His voice had a reproving note. "You ain't afraid of him, are you, son?"

Lee didn't look at him. The question got no rise from him. It wasn't fear he felt, only an implacable certainty. "He'll come," he muttered. "I know the Lone Wolf."

"Bah!" His father spat into the dust. "I'll wager a hundred to one that Ranger won't show his face past North Gap. Shore, I'll believe half the stories I heard about him. But he ain't fool enough to come into the Tombstones to try to arrest my own son!"

A faint smile lifted the corners of Lee's mouth. He reached in his pocket and took out a silver dollar and placed it on the veranda railing. "It's a bet," he said softly.

Anger flared harshly in Buck's pale eyes. "What in hell's gotten into you, son? You used to be near as hard as Mel before you went away. Even figgered you was smart to join the Rangers. But I never knew any man to scare you."

"I ain't exactly scared," Lee said flatly.

"But Hatfield will be showing up here. And it's me I'm worried about. I don't know what I'll do."

Buck Stringer was not a sensitive man—he missed Lee's point. "You won't have to do anythin'," he growled contemptuously. "Mel'll take care of him. I don't have time to bother with any damnfool badge-toter who thinks his tin badge means something in this country."

Lee's eyes held a thin amusement, a surface reaction to his father's blind confidence. "If Mel draws on Jim Hatfield you'll bury him. Mel's fast, but not that fast."

Buck scowled. "You believe that, eh?"

"I worked with him," Lee muttered. "I know."

Lee's dull voice stirred up the violence that always lay just below the surface in Buck Stringer. "You've sure gone soft since you left. Ever since Milly left you to run off with that slick gamblin' fellow." A rough baiting edged the older man's prodding voice. "I warned you not to marry her. Lay up with her if you wanted her bad—"

Lee swung. His fist smashed into Buck's mouth, staggering the heavier man. It was a reaction, as though his father had prodded a nerve end. He saw Buck's rough features break into blood-streaked smile. Then the older man backhanded him across the face, spilling him over the low railing.

LEE STRINGER lay on the hot ground, spitting blood. His anger had left him as quickly as it had sprung up—there was no fight in him.

"Get up!" Buck challenged harshly, standing against the railing. "Dammit, ain't you even got the guts to back what you started?"

Lee got to his feet and brushed dirt from his clothes. He did it mechanically. A wicked light burned in Buck's eyes as his hands fisted—he knew he could beat his son into the dust and he was welcoming it.

Lee drew the back of his hand across his cut lips. "Sorry," he said thickly.

Buck's heavy shoulders quivered. He wanted to break his son out of the dark, unfathomable mood he was in. "What in hell are you sorry about?" he lashed out. "Because I called your wife a tramp?"

"She's dead," Lee said tonelessly. "I killed her."

"You should have done it two years ago!" his father snapped brutally.

Lee's eyes were dead. "Maybe," he muttered, and walked past his father, into the house.

Buck Stringer stood with clenched fists, glaring at the screen door. He couldn't understand what was bothering Lee. His woman had run out on him—in his code she deserved killing. That he had arranged and abetted it did not in the least bother him.

But it riled him that he couldn't reach his son, and even more it irked him to feel that Lee was afraid of a man. Jim Hatfield! He snorted. He had trampled too many reputations to be impressed by the Lone Wolf. If the Ranger was fool enough to show his face past Broken Crown he'd be shown little mercy.

He drew a deep breath and unclenched his hands and put his gaze on the dark barrier rimming the Basin. The tides of his anger still fretted him.

They should be showing up with Rosita soon. He had little doubt they would have overtaken his daughter—he wondered what fate Mel would have meted out to Coley Prindle.

Not that he cared about that dark, shy girl he had spawned. She was the result of an act he took casually and with brutal violence. It was her defiance of him that bothered.

Buck Stringer ruled Hangnoose, from his sons and daughter to the most casual rider, and no man left his employ without Buck's consent. There was that arrogance in the man, and that hungering need to rule.

Somewhere by the corrals a man shouted and Buck's attention was drawn to the rider showing up on the trail beyond. Even in the distance he recognized his brother's stooped figure—his eyes nar-

rowed on the limp figure across Vince's saddle.

Men drifted out of the bunkhouse across the yard to stare curiously, a few began to run toward the rider.

Buck waited, an unbelieving scowl darkening his features. In the hot stillness the roan's tired hoofs rang on the hard ground with implacable finality.

Vince shook off all offers of help. He rode up to where Buck waited, his teeth snagged against his bloodless lips. He had something to tell his brother before the weakness he had been fighting engulfed him.

"Rosita got away. Mel an' Slim are trailin' her an' Coley. They're in the Basin somewhere."

Buck's voice cut brutally across his brother's story. "Never mind Rosita. What happened to you an' Ed? Did Coley do this?"

Vince sneered. He had a good deal of his brother's arrogance, but not the untempered violence. "Never got to see Coley." He licked his lips. "Me an' Bawley tied into a ring-dinger, Buck. A Ranger named Jim Hatfield." He saw the shock go through the big man and he shook his head. "He's comin', Buck, the Lone Wolf. He's a bad man to tangle with."

He was trying to dismount as he talked, but the blackness washed up over him as he hooked his leg over the limp body of Ed Bawley. He slid out of saddle and Buck caught him as he fell.

CHAPTER V

Woman-Baited Trap

JIM HATFIELD left Shawlee's Store at sundown. He rode into the deep shadows of North Pass, a tall, alert man not entirely trusting the quiet peace of this narrow cut, nor the still heights above him.

The Stringer brand, a hangman's noose, was burned into the hindquarter of the steeldust—it was a symbol of old Buck Stringer's defiance of Texas law.

The floor of the canyon lifted and wound through Broken Crown, emerging finally along the flank of the first of the Tombstones, naked spires of rock that dotted the Basin.

There were few corners of Texas that were alien to the big Ranger, but this broken land that stretched out ahead of him, spilling across the border into Chihuahua, was strange to the Lone Wolf.

He had no plan other than to ride into Buck's camp for Lee Stringer—he was riding a hunch that his bluff might work. The badge on his shirt gave testimony that the weight of the Texas Rangers was behind him, and in most sections it gave men pause. But he wasn't sure that Buck Stringer would be impressed.

It was on Lee Stringer he pinned his hopes. The man had once been a Ranger.

The steeldust snorted softly and quickened her pace and Jim smiled thinly as he gave her her head. There was no visible trail to Hangnoose, but the steeldust would know the way.

Night sucked the last vestiges of day from the gullied land. Stars pricked the velvet blackness of the arching sky, some of them so low they seemed yellow beacons on the dark, distant hills.

The Lone Wolf drifted with the steeldust, not pushing it. He missed Goldy's rythmic stride, the big sorrel's awareness. The steeldust was a stranger to him and they both knew it.

The Hangnoose bronc slid down a crumbly bank and turned south with the course of an old stream bed gleaming white under the stars. Jim pulled the animal in toward the bank, knowing a rider could be easily spotted against the pale sand.

The distant slam of a sixgun brought him up in saddle. The shots came from somewhere ahead, somewhat smothered by the dark bulk of a rise forcing the old stream bed into a wide bend. Two shots—it might have been three—Hatfield wasn't sure. The last two could have been so close as to sound like one.

They came from beyond the bend, and a hard caution rode the Lone Wolf. He dismounted and tied the steeldust to a

bush and waited, frowning, remembering that his movements could have been watched from the time he left Shawlee's.

Might be the gents who signalled from the rim caught up with the girl and Coley Prindle, he thought and regret left its streak in him. He had hoped Rosita Stringer would get away.

He left the shadows of the bank and broke for the far bank, moving fast. He was in the shadows again when the girl screamed—it lifted the hackles on his neck with the thin vibrating horror in it.

The Lone Wolf headed for the sound, a grim urgency driving him. He skirted the shouldering hill and suddenly paused to eye the campfire in the dark gully below.

The girl screamed again. He could see her just beyond the fire, standing by a figure slumped against the bank. She was covering her face in her hands.

A lean, wiry individual stood closer to the fire. His saddle lay on the sand a few feet away and his rifle rested across it. The girl backed away from the slumped figure and the slim man spun her around and slapped her. She staggered and sank down, still hiding her face in her hands.

Jim started down the slope. He walked with the soft tread of a hunting cat, his face dark and expressionless.

In the shadows beyond the fire horses moved. The Lone Wolf caught the sheen of Goldy's sleek hide; he saw the golden stallion suddenly raise his head and look toward the slope. A whinny fluttered in the stud's throat.

The slim man whirled around, his glance probing the gully shadows. He took a long stride for his rifle just as Jim reached the outer edge of the fire.

"Let it lay, *compadre!*" Jim warned harshly.

Slim Meeker froze. He was wearing a belt gun, and there was a knife in a sheath at his side. He kept his hands away from them, a cold, expressionless stare in his eyes.

The girl remained kneeling, face in her hands.

Jim came into the firelight. He could see the slumped figure against the bank now. The body of what once had been a slim, curly-headed man. Coley Prindle,

A TALL TEXAS TALE

TOUGH TALK

A YOUNG cowpuncher, donning his Sunday best and riding the train some fifty miles from his corral to call upon a young lady in a West Texas town, put up at the hotel to keep fresh and neat. No sooner had he registered than he was visited by a delegation of husky, cold-eyed local punchers.

Telling of the experience later, the young cowman said, "The fellow speaking for that bunch told me they didn't have many girls thereabouts, and that they didn't aim to have any outsiders horning in. He told me that another train was leaving in an hour, warning me I'd better get down to the depot and catch it."

"What'd you say to that?" asked a listener.

"What do you think I said?" was the reply. "I told that outfit I was a free-born Texan, twenty-one years old, and didn't go for bluffing. I told them horn-to-horn that I was heeled for whatever they had in mind, that I'd heard big talk before and was a bad man to fool with when roused."

"What happened then?" the curious one inquired breathlessly.

"Why, then, I just naturally moseyed on down to the depot."

—*Jack Kytle*

he thought. The man had paid with uncalled violence for his attentions to this girl. He had been shot twice in the chest, and then his throat had been cut.

The girl rocked softly and moaned. A sickening anger streaked Jim's gaze as he realized the naked cruelty of this scene.

He stepped up to the Hangnoose man, shoved him around, reached down for his Colt and tossed it into the darkness. Meeker stood still to the rough handling, he seemed to sense the grim violence in the Ranger.

Even when Hatfield slid his knife from his sheath he made no move. The Lone Wolf glanced at the clean blade.

The voice close behind Jim was sibilantly cruel. "Not his, Ranger. Mine. I cut Prindle's throat. Meeker ain't got the stomach for it!"

Hatfield was holding Meeker's knife in his hand, but he knew he'd be dead before he could use it. Meeker grinned as he edged away from Jim. And a realization of how he had been trapped sickened Jim.

The man behind him moved with the slithering tread of an Apache. There was an Apache's flat cruelty in the voice that said: "Welcome to the Tombstones, Ranger—"

Jim whirled. He had Meeker's knife in his hand and he flipped it behind him, hoping more to distract his ambusher than to score a hit. A palmed Colt smashed against the back of his head, driving him forward into a leaping blackness.

MEL STRINGER chuckled. He was a wolf of a man standing over Hatfield, his enormous shoulders humped in readiness. He was an ugly man with light gray eyes in a dark face. He walked and looked like a broncho Indian; he wore moccasins and the tails of his dirty cotton shirt hung out over his greasy pants. He wore his belt guns over the shirttail.

"Spotted him crossin' the arroyo around the bend," he told Slim. "Saw him leave Vince's steeldust hitched to a bush 'bout a half mile from here. Get it. I'll keep him company until you get back."

Slim nodded. He hauled his saddle into the shadows and a few minutes later was riding up the arroyo.

Mel stood over Jim, waiting with stolid patience. The fire died down and the shadows hid Prindle's body. His sister made no sound, and he ignored her, as though she didn't exist. He waited with gun cocked until Meeker showed up, riding his dun and leading the steeldust.

The Lone Wolf stirred. He rolled over and looked up at the man standing above him and at first his pained gaze made out a distorted shadow. He set his teeth against the throbbing in his head and waited for his eyes to clear.

"So you're the great Jim Hatfield!" Mel sneered. "The Ranger who's got my brother shakin' in his boots?" He spat in Jim's face. "Well, I'm gonna whittle you down to size an' hang your hide on the corral fence. I'll show Lee what he's been runnin' from!"

Jim slowly wiped the spittle from his cheek. He got to his feet and faced the man, a cold and dispassionate anger held in check by the gun in Mel's fist.

Meeker slid out of saddle and came up behind the Lone Wolf. He was a cautious man and he moved quickly—he had Jim's Peacemakers before the Ranger realized they had been taken.

"Feel easier with him defanged, Mel," Meeker said. He glanced at Prindle's body. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Leave him to the coyotes," Mel growled. "Bring the other hosses. We've done what we came for, an' got ourselves a prize, too."

While Meeker headed for the horses tied up in the shadows beyond the dying fire, Mel walked over to where his half sister kneeled. She cringed as he loomed over her. He grabbed her by the hair with his left hand and jerked her to her feet.

"I oughta do to you what I done to him," he growled, motioning to Coley's body.

A deep futile hate burned in Rosita's eyes. But there was no fight in her. Watching, Jim felt a compassion for her which fanned his helpless anger.

Meeker came back, leading Goldy and another saddled mount. "Coley's gray is wind broke," he announced. "Want him along?"

Mel scowled. "Can't stand a horse I have to baby," he snarled. He stepped into the brush beyond the fire. The report of his Colt made a heavy sound in the night.

He came back, the muzzle of his Colt leaking smoke. He backed his curt orders with it. "You'll ride my dun, Ranger. I got a fancy for that big sorrel stud of yours."

The Lone Wolf hesitated. Mel's hammer cocked; there was short patience in the man. "Get aboard, Hatfield! Or I'll be bringin' my brother a dead Ranger for a present!"

The dun snorted and jerked as Jim took the reins from Meeker. He felt the heavy pounding in his head as he put his foot in stirrup and heaved himself up.

The dun backed away from Meeker who was settling in saddle of his own mount. Rosita was a still, small figure on the steeldust.

Mel Stringer walked to Goldy. The big sorrel turned to eye this stranger with suspicious stare.

Mel caught Goldy's reins and started to swing up to saddle. Jim's sudden whistle caught him by surprise. The seemingly docile stallion whirled, reared up on its hind legs, forefeet slashing out. Mel was sent sprawling.

Jim's voice cracked in the night, "Go, Goldy!"

Trained to obey without question, the sorrel lunged into the shadows. Mel Stringer came to his feet, cursing—his hand jumped to his holster gun. He was clearing leather when Jim sent the dun hurtling into the killer.

Mel's shot went wild as he was spun around and sent staggering again. Hatfield made a break for it. He dug his heels into the dun's sides and the animal lunged ahead. He was beyond Mel when the hump-shouldered outlaw's Colt roared.

The dun went down, shot through the head. Hatfield fell free. He scrambled to his feet and suddenly stopped as Meeker rode his cayuse in front of him.

"Hold it, Ranger!" the Hangnoose man snapped. "You ain't goin' anywhere!"

Mel Stringer came up, his ugly face twisted in a snarl. "So you managed to get that big sorrel of yours free! Made me kill my own cayuse! Fixed it so one of us has to walk—a real long walk, Ranger. Now guess who it'll be?"

Jim shrugged. He had made his try—he was lucky to still be alive.

"Ride up with Rosita," Mel told Meeker. "I'll take your cayuse."

Meeker switched mounts. Mel settled himself in saddle and shook out a loop and flipped it expertly over Hatfield, jerking it tight. "Let's go," he chuckled, and kicked his animal into a run.

CHAPTER VI

The Beating

HANGNOOSE was asleep when Jim Hatfield stumbled into the big yard behind Mel Stringer. He had run most of the way and been dragged part of the way, and only an iron, unbeatable will kept him on his feet now.

Mel jerked his horse to a stop before the darkened ranchhouse. His Colt leaped out and he fired three shots into the air, following them with a wild rebel yell.

The bunkhouse door creaked and a longjohn clad figure cradling a Winchester loomed in the dark aperture. Mel whirled and sent a shot crashing over the bunk house. His voice boomed triumphantly. "Pile out, you ear-poundin' mavericks! I brung home the prize bacon!"

A light glowed against the ranchhouse windows and then Buck Stringer yanked the door open and strode out. He was in bare feet and underwear—he had jammed a hat on his head and he held a cocked Colt in his big fist. He came down into the yard and surveyed the starlighted figures and he snapped with harsh impatience, "You gone loco, son?"

Mel turned to him. "Where's Lee, paw?

I brung him a present." His tone was gleeful. "I brung him that Ranger he's been scared of!"

Buck Stringer stiffened. He peered at the tall figure at the end of Mel's rope.

"Hatfield?"

"Yup. Tin badge an' all!"

Buck grunted. "Well, I'll be jiggered! Roped an' hogtied." He laughed raucously. "Lee!" he bellowed. "Come out here! You, too, Vince!"

Mel slid out of saddle. "Took him without much fuss, paw!" he boasted. "Knew he was comin', so when we run Coley an' Rosita down, we set a trap for him. He walked into it like some tenderfoot."

Buck came down into the yard. "Untie him," he told Mel. I want a good look at the Ranger who's got half the bad men in Texas huntin' cover!"

Mel grunted. He walked up behind the Lone Wolf and drew his sheath knife. He wasn't expecting trouble from this man he had run ragged. He slid the sharp edge over Jim's thongs and cut them loose.

The miles of dragging humiliation had built up a vicious, driving rage in the big Ranger that blinded him now to the consequences of what he would do. He waited until he felt his arms loosen, then he pivoted, driving his right hand for Mel's face.

Mel was caught flat-footed, knife in hand. Jim's fist mashed his mouth. He staggered back and Jim chopped down with the edge of his palm against Mel's knife arm above the wrist.

Mel's lips sucked in sharp against loosened teeth. He dropped the knife and reached for his holstered Colt with his other hand.

Jim's right hand caught him on the side of his heavy jaw. The force of the blow spun him around and the Lone Wolf's left, slashing downward with the weight of Jim's shoulders behind it, crumpled the hump-shouldered killer. He sagged and fell on his knees and then slumped forward, his forehead bumping against the hard earth.

Meeker had one of Jim's Colts in his hand. Buck's voice stopped him.

"I'll take care of him, Slim!"

The Hangnoose boss moved toward Jim, an incongruous figure who managed to convey a grim authority despite his appearance. He paused by Mel's unconscious body and looked at Hatfield who was sucking in great gulps of air—his thick lips quirked in grudging smile.

"So you're the Lone Wolf? Maybe there's somethin' to your rep after all."

Hatfield steadied himself. His whole body ached and the pain over his eyes was sharp now, pounding. He massaged his bruised knuckles, his voice cold, demanding.

"I've come for Lee Stringer, Buck. I think you know why."

Buck nodded. "Sure, I know why. But I don't think it's anybody's business but ours, Ranger. The man my son killed wasn't worth the slugs Lee used on him!"

"And the woman?"

"She was his wife. She was no good."

"That's not for you, or Lee, to decide," Jim said meagerly. "He'll have to stand trial."

"No, Jim!" Lee's voice was flat. He was standing on the porch, a shadowy lean figure. "I'm not going back with you, Jim."

The Lone Wolf faced the man he had come for. He was unarmed, surrounded by hostile men. But he wore his badge on his shirt and he had the might of Texas behind him.

"You swore an oath once," he reminded Lee. "To uphold law and order in Texas."

"To hell with Texas!" Lee said. His voice had a toneless quality. "I'm not leaving here."

Between Buck and Hatfield Mel Stringer moved. He came to his hands and knees and shook his head like a dog. Then he lurched to his feet, staggered against Buck's solid bulk and whirled to face Jim, his right hand jerking at his holstered Colt.

Buck Stringer caught his arm and whirled him around. "I'm handling this," he growled. "Keep that iron pouched. I want him alive."

Mel wiped his bloody mouth. "Don't

stop me, paw! No man can hit me like that an' get away with it!"

"I want him alive, I said!" Buck snapped. "If you think you're man enough to take it out of his hide, give me your guns!"

Mel spat blood into the night. He unbuckled his gun belts and handed them to Buck, who passed them on to the man next to him. "Make it fast," Buck growled to his son. "We got work to do in the mornin'."

THE Hangnoose men pressed around them, making a tight, silent ring. From the porch Lee Stringer watched with cold detachment.

Win or lose, Hatfield knew, he'd never be allowed to leave here alive. He knew this now, and he knew that he had misjudged Lee Stringer, as he had underrated the stories he had heard of this Hangnoose bunch.

He turned to face Mel squarely, and there was no spring left in his bruised, tired frame, only a bitter determination to make Mel Stringer regret his words.

Someone shoved Hatfield from behind and he staggered into Mel as the humpshouldered man swung for Jim's face. The blow landed high on Hatfield's cheek, spinning him around. Mel closed in, driving his knee for Jim's groin.

Hatfield twisted and caught the knee against his hip. He jammed the heel of his left hand out hard and caught Mel under the ear. Mel's head snapped back and Hatfield crowded him, knowing he'd have to end this fast or take the beating of his life. He didn't have the stamina to make a fight of it.

He drove a hard right into Mel's midsection and caught the sagging man with an uppercut that clicked Mel's teeth together. Mel's knees gave way and the Lone Wolf started a right for Mel's face.

A heavy blow against the back of his neck sent him staggering against Mel. He caught hold of the cursing man and hung on, trying to fight the blackness before his eyes.

Buck's voice sounded far away. "Reckon you need a little help, son. Give him his beatin' so we can turn in for the night."

Hatfield tried to push Mel away. He felt rough hands close on his arm, pull him back, lock them in helpless position behind him. Buck's sour breath rasped in his ear:

"Come on, son, get it over with!"

Mel's dark, bloody face loomed up before Jim. There was no sense of fair play here, only a cold and ugly taking of satisfaction.

Mel Stringer sapped his strength on the big Ranger. He lashed out at the helpless Ranger with a cruelty that finally brought a muffled, tortured cry from Lee Stringer.

"That's enough, Mel! Dammit, that's enough!"

Buck turned to stare at the shadowy figure of his son on the porch. He caught the glint of a gun in Lee's hand and his breath came sharp in his throat; he shook his head in grim disbelief.

Mel turned to face his brother, a distorted, inhuman look on his bloody face.

"Kill him, if you have to!" Lee said thinly. "But do it quick—not like an Injun!"

Mel spat blood in snarling defiance to his brother. "Stay out of this, you snivelin' son."

Buck Stringer let Hatfield go and the Ranger sagged to the ground unconscious. He backhanded Mel across the mouth and walked to the porch, a ponderous, grim man and yanked the Colt from Lee's hand.

"That's enough from both of you!" he snarled. "If you've gone that soft, get back into the house! Stay out of this!" He turned to Mel who was eyeing him with sullen rebellion. "You, too. Get inside an' get that blood washed off. An' remember—what that Ranger just did to you I can do twice as good. Now get out of the way!"

He waited until Mel stumbled past him, into the house. Then he turned to Slim who was standing beside the steeldust.

"Get those leg irons from the blacksmith shop. Anders," he addressed the man standing next to Meeker, "you an'

Bigfoot carry this badgetoter into the bunkhouse. See that he is chained to one of the empty racks. I want to see him there in the mornin'!"

Rosita Stringer remained slumped in saddle of the steeldust. If she had witnessed anything that had gone on tonight, she gave no evidence of it. She seemed in a trance.

Buck reached up and pulled her out of saddle. "Tina!" he shouted. "Come out here!"

A dumpy figure with coarse black hair in two pigtails on her nightgown clad shoulders came to the porch.

Buck pulled his daughter to her feet and slapped her hard. "Next time you try to run away I'll kill you!"

Rosita lifted a hand to her face. Buck shoved her toward the house. "Take this female whelp of yours, Tina!" he snarled, "an' give her a hidin'. An' if she runs away again I'll kill you both!"

The Hangnoose riders went back into the bunkhouse, trailing Bigfoot and Anders carrying the unconscious Ranger. The steeldust drifted toward the corral, joining Mel's animal against the pole bars.

Buck Stringer stood alone in the trampled yard, a big, hard man conscious of the authority he wielded.

"You came at the right time, Hatfield," he muttered.

He was thinking of Cardona, the Mexican rebel chief across the line. He had promised Cardona guns and money—but all the stolid, arrogant Mexican had said was, "Maybe."

Guns and money had not been enough, but he knew Cardona. And he knew how much Cardona wanted the Lone Wolf.

"Just in time," he repeated, and felt an immense satisfaction with the night's happenings.

CHAPTER VII

Doublecross

THE flat light of the early sun filtered through the dirty bunkhouse window and crept down the side of the bunk where Hatfield lay. There was movement in the long room where men stirred, dressed, accompanied by morning oaths, growls, mutters of bad temper.

Jim lay on his back, both his legs chained to the uprights at the foot of the bunk. His face ached as he moved his split lips. He was still fully dressed, in torn and dirty clothes, and his ribs pained as he shifted slightly.

He lay still, staring up at the ceiling, amazed that he was still in one piece. He had taken worse beatings, he thought philosophically, but the viciousness of the Stringers brought a bleak light to his green eyes.

He had seen with what utter cruelty Mel Stringer had treated his half sister—he had an understanding, now, why she had tried to run off with the unfortunate Coley Prindle.

He could understand what had driven Lee Stringer from the Tombstones. Of Milly Stringer, Lee's wife, he knew nothing. In the time he had known Lee, the renegade ranger had never spoken of her.

But this ranch was no place for a woman; they did not fit in it, nor, he was to learn, did they leave their mark on it. There was no graciousness about this place. Tina Stringer, if she had ever entertained any desires to lend her touch to Hangnoose, had long ago been squelched.

It was a man's ranch, rough, dirty and strictly utilitarian.

The Lone Wolf thought of Wild Bill McDowell, waiting for word from him. He knew Captain McDowell had meant it when he said that if he didn't hear from Jim in ten days he'd take a company of Rangers into the Tombstones.

"You look like you fell in front of a stampede," a voice greeted cheerfully.

Jim turned his head and watched a tall, ungainly figure hunker down beside him. The man wore a mismatched suit, dark gray coat and blue trousers which, though frayed, were neat and pressed. He was older than most Jim had observed in the bunkhouse, with a thin, scholarly face and an apologetic smile. He carried a spectacle case in his breast pocket and the marks

left by the steel rims were deep across the bridge of his thin, hooked nose.

He studied Jim through watery blue eyes. "Thought I'd have to patch you up some, when Mel drew a gun on you last night. Buck stopped him just in time."

The Lone Wolf digested this bit of news. "You handy with arnica and bandages?"

"Probably do more patching up of knife wounds, bullet holes and assorted cussedness on Hangnoose than the average town doc," he said. He sniffed goodnaturedly. "So you're the great Jim Hatfield, Captain McDowell's ace troubleshooter?"

Jim grinned crookedly. "Don't feel great at all," he said honestly. He wondered what this man's game was. The others had left him alone, disregarding him entirely, or eyeing him with surly hostility.

"I'm Smith," the other said. He shifted his weight on his heels. "I've been called 'Sawbones' Smith so long I've almost forgotten my real name. I was christened Frank Bonner. But that was long ago, back in Pennsylvania."

He seemed cheerful and garrulous and Jim listened idly. It helped him forget his bruised body, his helplessness. Smith kept talking even when the triangle outside emptied the bunkhouse. He waited until the last man had stomped out, then his face turned grave and his voice hurried.

"I haven't got much time, Ranger. But I'm here to help you. I'm riding down to Shawlee's today. If you've got a message you want to send back to Ranger headquarters, give it to me. I'll see that it gets off."

Jim sat up on the bunk. The effort brought a twist of pain across his bruised face.

"A message?" he said coldly, suspiciously.

"Sawbones" Smith shrugged. "I've wanted to get back at Buck Stringer for years," he said harshly. "But no man, or woman, leaves Hangnoose without Buck's sayso." He eyed Jim, his lips pursing. "They're going to kill you, Ranger. There's nothing I can do to help. Buck's going to turn you over to that Mex rebel, Cardona. He's sent Myers out to arrange things."

"Why are you telling me?" Jim asked.

Smith glanced around the empty bunkhouse and instinctively lowered his voice. "If the Rangers were to surprise Cardona on this side of the river, with the Hangnoose bunch—" He let the meaning hang in that empty room and rubbed his hands nervously. "I can't help you, Ranger," he muttered, "but if I could get back at Buck, that would be enough."

Jim's voice was hard. "You sure you can get that letter mailed?"

Smith nodded. "I'm ridin' down to Shawlee's with Anders. Supposed to bring back that buggy Rosita left there."

The Lone Wolf hesitated. If he sent a note to McDowell, he knew Wild Bill would come arunning. But a nagging suspicion held him. It was somehow too pat.

"Sure," he said. "I'll write a note to Captain McDowell."

Smith nodded. "I'll get pencil and paper." He straightened and hurried to his bunk. He took notepaper, envelope and a stub of a pencil from a small tin box he kept locked and returned to Jim.

Jim grinned through swollen lips. He had nothing to lose if he worded the message carefully. If it got through Captain McDowell would be warned. If Smith was part of a trap Buck had planned, the message he'd write would be of no use to them.

He told McDowell what had happened. He mentioned his belief that Buck Stringer was planning a raid on the border towns below the Tombstones with the help of Cardona. That whatever was planned would come off soon.

He put all this in code and handed it to Smith and watched the man's face as he read it.

Smith glanced at the unintelligible message with only brief interest. He grinned and folded the message and tucked it in his pocket. His manner changed.

"Buck said you'd fall for it," he chuckled.

Jim lunged for him. But Smith backed

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away, grinning. "The great Jim Hatfield!" he mocked. "Hell, you been outsmarted ever since you came through Broken Crown!"

He was still chuckling as he left.

TWENTY minutes later Mel Stringer and a hardfaced blond kid came into the bunkhouse. Mel stood by the door, a Colt in his hand, while the kid unlocked the iron bands from around Jim's ankles.

"If you can walk, get up an' come out!" he growled. He slouched like some lobo against the framing, his hat pulled low over his bruised, ugly face.

Jim swung his legs over the side of the bunk and was mildly surprised to find he could walk. He had to clamp an iron will over his facial muscles not to reveal the pain which racked his body.

He walked down the length of the bunkhouse followed by the blond, tough-faced kid. Mel eased away from the door and let Jim by; there was a sullen, contained expression on his face. He had been badly humiliated by this Ranger in front of Hangnoose's crew last night, and he wouldn't forget it.

Jim stepped out into the sunlit yard, his eyes squinting against the early morning brightness. He put his narrowed glance over this sprawling spread which he now saw was backed by a low sand hill just behind the ranchhouse. Corrals and sheds staggered haphazardly away from the main house, and he saw at least a dozen men moving about.

Mel growled, "Paw wants to see you, in the house."

Jim walked across the yard. The blond kid hung back by the bunkhouse, waiting. Suddenly he called out, "Mel—up on the hill!"

Mel Stringer stopped in midstride. Just ahead of him Hatfield raised his glance and gave a quick start.

A golden stallion had come into sight on the hill above the house. A big sorrel stud, saddled, reins trailing. He stood outlined against the brightness of the southern sky, a magnificent animal, watching.

Mel's Colt lifted, then dropped. The range was too far for a hand gun. He turned and yelled to the blond kid. "I'll pay a thousand dollars to the man who brings that sorrel in!"

The kid started to run for the corral. Another rider, just coming out of the saddle shed, heard Mel's offer and started back for his saddle.

Hatfield lifted his hand, then dropped it sharply down by his side. The big sorrel wheeled to the signal and disappeared.

Buck Stringer was waiting for the Lone Wolf in the big dining room. He sat at the head of a massive oak table whose surface was devoid of any covering. The surface was spur-scoured, cigaret-burned, coffee-and-grease-stained. His breakfast plate was pushed aside and as Jim entered he was wiping his egg-stained lips with the back of his sleeve.

He looked up as Jim entered, followed by Mel, and took a long, noisy drag at his coffee mug, then settled back and drew a crooked Mexican cheroot from his pocket.

Lee Stringer sat on his father's right. The renegade Ranger was smoking a cigarette in silent, brooding thought—most of the food was on his plate, untouched.

Buck lighted up, blew a cloud of blue-gray smoke expansively toward Jim, and waved grandiosely toward a chair. "Sit down, Hatfield," he invited pleasantly. "I'll have my gal bring you some chow."

Mel slouched past Jim and sank in a chair across from his brother. He looked down into his coffee mug, an angry, resentful figure.

Jim put his attention briefly on the man who had called himself "Sawbones" Smith. The man was sitting next to Buck, on his left—he rolled a matchstick around between his lips. He was wearing his spectacles and working on a piece of note paper, pausing to study the message Jim had written out and handed to him.

A sinking feeling took hold of Hatfield. He had purposely worded his message so that McDowell would be warned, and put it in code so that it could not be tampered with. But he had forgotten about Lee.

"Rosita!" Buck bellowed in the direction of the kitchen. "Bring in steak and eggs for our guest!"

Jim sank down in a chair facing Buck. Lee didn't look at him. The man seemed far away, lost in some bitter backwash of memory. Mel eyed Hatfield with unconcealed hate. Without his father's injunction, Jim knew, this man would have killed him before this.

Rosita came in from the kitchen. She was dressed in peasant blouse and tight Levis which accentuated the roundness of her hips. The blouse was cut low. Buck had a perverse streak in him. He knew how his daughter affected his riders. Yet any man who made a pass at her died.

She came to the table carrying Jim's breakfast. She didn't look at anyone. She put the plate down in front of Jim and the Lone Wolf saw the discolored bruises on her face. She kept her eyes on the floor as she turned and went back into the kitchen.

"I've heard a lot about you, Hatfield," Buck said affably. "Even believin' only half what I heard, it would make you out

to be nine feet tall. Regular caterwampus. Tougher'n a bull buffler an' twice as smart as the next man. Fastest man with a Colt in Texas—there're a lot of men who think you're the fastest man in the country. Might be—might be."

Jim picked at his food. His mouth was cut and eating hurt. But he kept at eating, letting Buck talk. The man was leading up to something. Buck seemed mighty pleased with himself, pleased

enough to show Hatfield this much hospitality.

"Lee said you'd come after him," the boss of Hangnoose continued. "Hell, I didn't believe him. I told him not even the Lone Wolf could be that kind of a damn fool. But," he shrugged, "it turned out Lee was right. An' it turned out fine —for me!"

He took the cheroot from his mouth and drained his coffee. There was a half-filled whisky bottle in front of him and he poured a generous slug into the mug and thinned it with black, bitter brew from the pot at his elbow.

"Ever hear of Cardona?" he asked abruptly.

Jim shrugged. "Some," he admitted.

"Cardona's heard of you," Buck grinned. "He wants you more than he wants guns. I'm goin' to give you to him, Hatfield!"

The Lone Wolf drank his coffee. He knew Buck had been baiting him, he knew that the Hangnoose boss was aware that he had played a key part in breaking up a raid of Cardona across the border near El Paso a year ago. He had learned later that one of the men he had killed had been Cardona's younger brother.

Cardona was three-quarters Yaqui. He hated Hatfield with a Yaqui's implacable intensity, and he would kill the Lone Wolf with a cruelty that would make the Stringers look like amateurs.

Buck was puffing contentedly on his cigar. "I've been wanting a free hand along this strip of border for years, Ranger. You're gonna give it to me—you an' Cardona!"

Jim's gaze held a bleak warning. "You've been left alone up here, Buck. Don't push your luck too far!"

Buck chuckled. "Who's going to stop me, Hatfield? The Rangers? When I get through there won't be any organization left in Texas known as the Texas Rangers!"

Jim's grin was contemptuous. "That's big talk, Buck."

Buck reached out and prodded Smith. "Read Mr. Hatfield's letter to Captain McDowell, Sawbones."

Smith looked up from the note he was writing. He fixed his spectacles firmly on his nose, coughed gently, and began to read:

"Dear Bill:

Ran into something up here in the Tombstones that has made me forget Lee Stringer for the time being. The Hangnoose bunch is teaming up with Cardona, the Mexican rebel leader, for a raid across the Rio Grande. They're going to hit the towns of Ciba, La Plata and Cody and wipe them out. I have definite proof they will meet in a little canyon just east of Ciba on Thursday, the 10th. They don't suspect that I know. If you can round up a company of Rangers and get them by rail to El Paso, you can make it on schedule. I'll be waiting for you at the bend in the river, just below La Plata. This is our big chance to wipe out both border gangs. I'll be expecting you. Signed. . . . Jim Hatfield, Lieutenant, Texas Rangers."

The Lone Wolf listened with a thin smile. "Nice letter," he admitted. "But it won't fool Wild Bill. It isn't my writing—and it isn't in code."

Buck laughed. "It'll be in your writing, Hatfield." He jerked a thumb at Smith. "Sawbones here ain't much of a cowhand. He can't ride worth a hoot, he's scairt of guns, an' he still don't know a yearlin' from a goat. But he's the best forger west of the Mississippi. And with a copy of the letter he got you to write for him he's turned out the neatest bit of your handwriting you'd care to see!" He saw the grim look which spread across Hatfield's face and he guffawed. "As to the code part—" He looked at Lee. "Tell him, son!"

Lee didn't raise his eyes from the table. His voice was flat, disinterested. "I'll put it in Ranger code, Paw, like I promised."

Hatfield pushed back in his chair, his voice like chilled steel. "You've slid a long way down, Lee, a long way. I hope you burn in hell a long time for this!"

Mel emptied his mug of coffee into Jim's face. The Lone Wolf came up out of his chair, but Mel's Colt stopped him. The

hump-shouldered killer's voice came harshly, striking across the table.

"Maybe Cardona won't get to you first."

"Shut up, Mel!" Buck's voice was a harsh bellow from the head of the table. "Eat your breakfast, Hatfield," he growled as Mel sank back. "Cardona has first call on you. And he'll want you healthy. He has his own peculiar ideas of how to break you down."

CHAPTER VIII

"I Didn't Mean to Kill Her"

THE days went by. Goldy remained at large despite Mel's repeated $1,000 offer and the efforts of a half dozen Hangnoose men to ride the big sorrel stud down.

For Hatfield the days passed without incident and with decreasing hope of escape. He was kept padlocked to the bunk during the day and night, except for meals and other necessary functions, and was always escorted or watched by an armed guard.

He came to know Hangnoose. It was a big, sprawling, loosely knit place without pretensions. Jim got the feeling of an armed camp that could be struck at a moment's notice—he came to believe that a raid in force against this place would have little effect on this outlaw organization. Buck Stringer ran his outlaw bunch from this present headquarters, but he had little camps scattered all over the Tombstones and across the border in Mexico, and he could retreat to any one of them if necessary.

Captain McDowell had doubtless been aware of this, and knowing this he had let Hatfield talk him into letting him come into Crown Basin alone. One man might have had a chance to take Lee.

He had muffed that chance. The Lone Wolf thought of this through the long, hot days and the nights. He had walked into a trap because of a woman, and because he had believed in Lee Stringer's essential fairness. Perhaps he had expected too much. Lee Stringer had been a Ranger once. But he was a Stringer first, and he had killed a man and a woman, even if to his tortured mind he had deemed the killing just. And there was no justification for the money he had stolen from the stage, although Hatfield now suspected that Lee's action in taking the money had been more in the nature of defiance than calculated robbery.

So he lay chained to his bunk and brooded on what had happened. He had not foreseen Buck Stringer's tieup with Cardona, nor paid much heed to the Mexican rebel chief's rumored hatred of the Lone Wolf. Cardona was one of those perennial peasant leaders of Mexico who through oratory and energy rose to shake his fist at the hard rule of the local government. Often it turned out to be a game of politics by which a man like Cardona was paid with appointment to some high office, or through outright money bribe, to desert his stated cause. Always it was the ignorant rabble who followed him who lost.

Cardona had grown to be a thorn in the side to the Mexican rurales these past years, and to the hard-pressed lawmen on the American side of the Rio Grande. He raided both sides of the border with grim impartiality, and it had been on one of these raids into Texas that Hatfield had killed Cardona's brother and came close to capturing Cardona himself.

Now Cardona was going to team up with Stringer. Both were unscrupulous, hard-fisted men—both were outlaws with a tough following. Between them, Jim knew, they could wipe out what little law and order resided in this vast, scantily populated area below the Tombstones.

Jim's hands clenched at his helplessness and the blond kid whose name he had heard as Jingo Bob stirred and lifted his eyes from the old magazine he was reading and measured Jim with cold, hard glance. He stood up and came over, standing far enough away to be out of Hatfield's reach, and surveyed the padlocks.

"Rattle 'em, Ranger!" he taunted. "You need the exercise." He turned and walked

back to his seat and settled back.

On the fifth day a slim, scarred Mexican rode into Hangnoose. He sat a fine-looking palomino horse and he rode with proud and regal bearing. His name was José Ferrito and he was Cardona's right hand man.

The Lone Wolf sat up as Buck Stringer and the newcomer came into the bunkhouse. Jingo Bob stood up respectfully.

José Ferrito walked slowly between the bunks and paused, putting his dark, level stare on Hatfield. A growth of wiry black beard darkened Jim's face, hiding the discolored bruises. The puffiness was gone from his cut lips and the soreness from his body. He returned the Mexican's level stare with cold amusement.

Ferrito nodded. "It looks like him, Señor Stringer."

"It is him!" Buck growled. "Take my word for it, if that badge on him ain't enough—"

"A badge like that can be had by almost anyone who wishes it badly enough," José murmured. "It need not be the famed Lone Wolf behind it."

"Why should I fool you?" Buck snapped impatiently. "Take my word for it, he's Jim Hatfield. Cardona will know, when I bring him to the rendezvous."

Ferrito shrugged. "That is so," he agreed. "And the guns?"

"Two hundred rifles. And five thousand rounds, plus two cases of dynamite. Cardona has my word."

José considered this. "We can most surely use the rifles, the dynamite and the rounds," he admitted. "With them we can—" He sighed softly. "But the risk is very great, Señor. To help you raid the Triangle, to plunder the towns you plan." He raised his shoulders with Latin expressiveness. "It is too great a risk, for us. It might create an international incident."

"Why should that bother the great Cardona?" Buck sneered. "With the rifles he can force concessions from the governor of Chihuahua, he can even put himself in power, perhaps. What will he have to fear from anyone on this side of the border?"

"The U. S. Army moves slowly, we know," José said sharply. "But the Texas Rangers, Señor. We have met them before!"

Stringer put a frowning silence between them. He walked to the near bunk and picked up a Winchester carbine stacked against the wall. He turned and tossed it to José, who caught it expertly and wonderingly.

"Two hundred rifles like this one. And my promise that Hatfield will be his, to do with as Cardona wishes. An' to make sure that the great Cardona will have nothing more to fear, I promise him that the backbone of the Texas Rangers will be smashed *before* we plunder the Triangle!"

José frowned. "The rifles I believe. Hatfield I see before me. But this other —" He shook his head.

Buck Stringer pointed a gnarled finger at the Lone Wolf. "You know of this man, José. He is Ranger Captain McDowell's most trusted lieutenant. He is our bait. Bait for a trap into which Captain McDowell will lead the flower of the Texas Rangers!"

José licked his lips in greedy anticipation. "It is a bold undertaking," he agreed. "If it can be done!"

"Southeast of the town of Ciba lies the canyon of the Placerita," Buck said. "They will have to ride through it, to the rendezvous I have arranged for them. A rendezvous they believe arranged by the Lone Wolf. For by this time Captain McDowell has received a letter in Hatfield's own handwriting, and in Ranger code. They will come without question, José. And they will ride into the muzzles of our guns. Think of it, José, together we will smash forever the might of the Texas Rangers!"

A flicker of admiration at the boldness of the scheme streaked José's sabre-scarred face. "It is possible, Señor." He looked at Hatfield. "The rifles we need. But for this man, ah, for this man Cardona will agree to your terms, Señor Stringer."

Buck grinned. "Then tell Cardona I'll meet him at Pico Canyon. I'll have the

rifles and the ammunition with me. And Jim Hatfield!"

They went out together, leaving the Lone Wolf on the bunk. By the wall Jingo Bob rolled a toothpick between his teeth and grinned.

THAT night Lee Stringer came to the bunkhouse. He stood in the doorway, watching the Lone Wolf. He seemed aged —his eyes had a dark, tortured appeal in them.

Jim was playing cards with Jingo Bob. The kid had shucked his gun belt and left it on his bunk, out of Jim's reach. He looked up as Lee approached.

"Wait outside," Lee said shortly.

Jingo frowned. He had his orders, but this was the boss's son. He hesitated only a moment. Then he got up and swaggered off.

Lee sat on the edge of the bunk facing the Lone Wolf. "I didn't mean to kill her," he said. He blurted the words out. He shuffled his feet and looked down at his hands. "I didn't want to kill her. It was an accident, Jim."

Hatfield tossed his poker hand down on the box which served as table. He was suddenly very sorry for this man who had changed so much from the cocky Ranger he had known.

"What about Dusty?" he asked softly. "Was that an accident, too?"

"It was me or him," Lee said. "I didn't shoot to kill."

"Maybe that'll rate you a good word in hell," Jim said drily. "But I'm not forgetting that there was twenty thousand dollars on that stage."

"I don't know why I took it," Lee countered. His eyes had a desperate appeal for understanding. "I didn't need the money. I never intended to keep it." His voice lowered. "No one here knows about it. I've buried the money in back of Shawlee's barn, at the foot of the pepper tree. Even Shawlee doesn't know about it."

Hatfield studied the ex-Ranger with sudden hope. His glance went to his cartridge belts hung over Meeker's bunk. His Peacemakers jutted out of his holsters. They were less than twenty feet away, but they might as well have been twenty thousand miles.

"Lee," he said coldly. "I can't promise you anything. But get me out of here and I'll see that you get a fair trial. Help me get away from here before Captain McDowell rides into the trap you helped your father set. Do this and maybe I'll—"

Mel's loud voice, snarling at Jingo Bob, interrupted him. Lee got to his feet. He shook his head. "I'm not leaving here, Jim. I decided that, when I rode away from Chuckawalla Wells. I'm never going to leave Hangnoose."

Mel strode into the bunkhouse, his glance measuring Hatfield and his brother with quick suspicion. "Paw's looking for you," he growled at Lee. "We got a pow-wow comin' up, and you'd better be there!"

Lee shrugged. He turned and walked out. Mel levelled a sneering glance at Hatfield before following his brother.

IX

"Take Me With You, Ranger"

TWO days later Mel Stringer rode into the hot, dusty yard leading Goldy. Hangnoose was practically deserted. Buck Stringer and the rest of Hangnoose had been gone for the past two days, rounding up the rifles and ammunition promised Cardona.

Aside from Jingo Bob, there remained at Hangnoose only Lee and Vince Stringer. Vince was staying in the ranchhouse, recovering from the bullet wound in his arm.

Hatfield was lying on his bunk when he heard Mel come back. It had been unusually quiet all morning and the mid-day heat had put Jingo Bob to sleep over the old newspaper he had been reading.

The ring of hoofs on the sun-baked ground roused him. He threw his paper aside and got up, stretching. He was a tough kid who was getting bored with his job.

Jim's voice probed in the heat. "I

thought Jingo Bob rated a more important job than nursemaid. Seems I heard the name Jingo Bob rated pretty high on Cochise County posters." He wanted to get under this kid's skin, but Bob only gave Jim a bleak, level look and walked to the door.

Jim watched him shape up a cigarette. He could see a patch of ground beyond Bob, and he wondered who had returned to Hangnoose. And then he heard Goldy's high shrill call and he came up tense on the bunk, a knot tightening in the pit of his stomach.

Jingo Bob stepped aside as Mel Stringer filled the doorway. Mel's face was dark and sweated and his shirt showed big patches of sweat. He looked at Hatfield and a dark streak of triumph glinted in his eyes.

"I got a surprise for you, Ranger. A real surprise!" He turned to Jingo. "Unlock him. Herd him outside. I want him to see this!"

He turned and stamped out and Jingo Bob came slowly between the bunks to where Jim lay. He unlocked the Lone Wolf and stepped back, the heel of his right hand on his Colt butt. He nodded coldly. "You heard Mel."

Jim rubbed his hands together. He stood up and walked to the door, pausing in the bright harsh sunlight, squinting his eyes against the glare.

Goldy had been tied to the stone trough in the middle of the yard. His saddle and blanket had been stripped from him—the saddle had been dumped by the trough. The big sorrel lunged and fought the doubled, ten foot rope which held him.

Jim put his back against the bunkhouse wall, five feet from the door. Rosita Stringer was coming up from the spring behind the ranchhouse. She was carrying a bucket of water, and it was the first time Jim had seen her since the morning he had breakfast in the house.

She looked at Jim and at Jingo Bob who was standing in the doorway. She put the water bucket down and stumbled and water spilled out onto the dry, dusty ground. There was no temper in her, She picked up the bucket and turned back to the spring.

Mel Stringer had disappeared inside the ranchhouse. He came out now, holding a lead-tipped quirt. Vince Stringer was on the veranda, in the big, rawhide-backed chair, his arm in a sling. He was puffing on a corncob pipe.

Mel started to walk toward Goldy.

"I ran him down myself, Ranger," he said. His voice rang harshly across the hot yard; it held an incalculable cruelty in it. "Waited for him by the only waterhole around."

The golden stallion turned to eye this hump-shouldered man with the quirt. His sleek-muscled body quivered, an angry whistling blew from him.

"I'm gonna cut him to ribbons, Ranger!" Mel said. "When I get through with him there won't be enough hide left to cover the palm of your hand!"

The quirt cut the air and left its mark across Goldy's flank. The big stud lunged and fought the rope and Mel's chuckle was an ugly sound, underlining the sorrel's angry whistling.

The Lone Wolf's hands clenched and he took a step forward. Jingo Bob's voice held him. "Easy, Ranger."

Mel's thick arm swung again. Sweat ran down his dark, stubbled cheeks. He backed away as Goldy wheeled and kicked out and his laughter rang out in the hot afternoon.

"Mel!" Lee's voice cracked sharply in the momentary quiet. "Don't hit him again!"

Mel's arm was pulled back, the shoulder muscles bunched tight under the shirt. He turned his head. Lee was standing slack against the porch support by the steps. His belt gun was strapped to his hip.

Mel's face darkened. "Keep out of this!" he snarled.

"Don't use that quirt again!" Lee warned. His voice was tight, wound up. "I've had enough of your stinkin' brutality. Takin' it out on a helpless animal is about your size. Leave that horse alone!"

"Damn your righteous hide!" Mel

sneered. He dropped the quirt and turned around, facing his brother like some lobo backed into a coulee. His voice rasped in that bright afternoon. "You warnin' me?"

Vince Stringer came to his feet. "Lee!" he growled. "Mel! Use your heads! What's a horse to you?"

Lee ignored his uncle. He was eyeing Mel, his face tense. "Cut that stud loose, Mel!"

THE hump-shouldered man stared at him. The silence ran between them, ugly and meaningful. Then Mel shrugged. He started to turn around, took a step toward the stone trough. It was enough to ease Lee, put him off guard. Then Mel whirled and fired.

He pumped two shots into his brother and stood spraddled, his dark face twisted, watching Lee fold slowly and fall on his face into the dust at the foot of the steps.

Vince Stringer looked down at Lee's body. Mel's eyes held him with cold questioning.

"He drew on me, Vince! *You saw him!*"

Vince said nothing. He turned and walked into the house and slammed the door behind him.

Mel sneered. He picked up the quirt he had dropped and turned to the quivering sorrel.

Jim's body was tight, ready for a break. Jingo Bob had stepped down from the door; he was standing slack-hipped, a dozen feet away. He was looking at Mel, but Hatfield knew that the kid would get him before he got around the corner of the bunkhouse.

Mel was walking toward Goldy again, his quirt arm drawing back. Jim started to ease toward the bunkhouse door.

The soft voice stopped him, like a dousing of icy water. He came up on his toes, his eyes probing the comparative darkness of the bunkhouse.

"It's loaded," Rosita Stringer said. She was just within the doorway, holding one of Jim's Peacemakers in her hands. As Jim put his startled glance on her she tossed the gun to him.

Hatfield didn't have time to wonder. He saw Jingo Bob glance at him with sudden alertness. Hatfield whirled, feeling the weight of his Peacemaker against his palm. He saw Jingo Bob's eyes widen in the split second before he jerked his Colt muzzle up.

Jim killed him with his first shot.

Mel spun around at the sound. He saw Jim with a smoking gun in his fist and he reacted with the reflexes of a trained killer—he drew and cut down at the Ranger.

Hatfield's slugs spun him around, hammered him with giant blows. He staggered back, fighting to keep his feet, his shots going wild. Then his boots seemed to tangle; he sat down heavily. His head dropped wearily on his chest and he fell sideways.

Jim wasted no movements. Vince Stringer was inside the house. He'd be coming out to see what had happened. Jim made a run for the ranchhouse and was at the foot of the stairs when Vince pushed through the screen door.

A SMALL TEXAS TALE

SEEING DOUBLE

WHY are you staring at me like that?" one man asked another as they bumped into each other in a Dallas store.

"I'm sorry," replied the second fellow, "but if it wasn't for the sideburns and mustache, you'd be the very image of my wife."

"You must be seeing things!" exclaimed the first man. "I haven't got sideburns or a mustache."

"I know," was the reply, "but my wife has."

—Al Spong

He jerked up short, staring into the muzzle of Jim's Colt.

Hatfield said, "Come down here! Walk over to the bunkhouse. Put your face against the wall, and stay like that!"

Vince gave him no argument. He walked past Rosita, standing in the doorway; he faced the wall with quiet resignation.

Jim glanced down at Lee as he turned away. There was a shocked look on Lee's face, as though he had not quite been prepared for dying.

Jim pushed a faint regret from his thoughts. Fate had its own odd way of meting justice, he reflected, and there was a touch of pity in his tone as he murmured, "So long, Lee."

Goldy muzzled him with warm affection as he patted the sorrel's neck. "We got a ride ahead of us, Goldy," Jim said. "Think you can hold out?"

The sorrel whinnied softly.

The Lone Wolf saddled Goldy and led him to where the girl was watching. Vince kept his face to the bunkhouse wall—he seemed old and stooped and without fight.

Rosita said brokenly, "I ride with you, Ranger. I've got to get away from here. Take me with you."

Jim hesitated. He owed this girl his life; taking her out of Crown Basin was the least he could do for her.

He heard the screen door close softly and he whirled, gun in hand. Tina Stringer had come out to the veranda. She was looking down at Lee's sprawled figure with resigned patience.

Jim handed Rosita his Colt. He indicated Vince. "Don't let him move. I'll be right out."

She took the gun and nodded, her face coming alive with a long-suppressed hatred. Vince Stringer shrank away from her as she faced him.

Jim ran into the bunkhouse. He scooped his gun belts off the nail over Meeker's bunk and holding them in his hand, he ran out, not entirely trusting the girl. He saw that she was standing in the sun, his Colt held in both hands, the hammer cocked back.

"I should kill you," she was saying intensely. "For all the things you've done to me."

Jim strapped his gun belts about his lean waist. "Let him be," he said quietly, reaching over her shoulder and taking his gun from her. He eased the hammer down and reloaded the gun and slipped it into holster. He checked his other Colt, finding it loaded.

"Saddle yourself a mount," he told the girl. "I'll wait for you."

She needed no urging. It took her five minutes to pick out a rangy piebald and saddle it. She rode up beside Jim, a small, slim figure in saddle.

JIM stepped up into Goldy's saddle. Far to the north a dust banner marred the sky. He frowned thoughtfully. It was time for Buck Stringer to be coming back.

"Anything you want to take with you?" he asked the girl.

Rosita shook her head. She was dressed in cotton shirt and blue Levis and a yellow silk bandanna held her hair in place. "No," she whispered softly. "Nothing."

Vince Stringer turned slowly to face them. "You'll never make it, Hatfield," he muttered. "There're only two ways for a horse to get out of Crown Basin. Buck's comin' up from North Pass now."

Jim's grin was bleak. "We'll see." He backed Goldy away from the bunkhouse, made a motion to the girl. "Let's ride south."

Tina Stringer came down the steps. She bent over Lee and picked up the gun he still held clenched in his right hand. She picked it up and held it in both hands and cocked it.

"Rosita!" Her voice came dull and demanding across the hot stillness.

The girl turned in saddle. There was thirty feet between them, and she saw the stolid look in her mother's eyes. Her face whitened; she sawed hard on the piebald's reins. *"No, mama—"*

The gun kicked hard in Tina's hands. The piebald staggered and shrilled in pain —it whirled and lunged away, beating a hard tattoo on the sun-baked earth. Rosita

hung on, clutching the piebald's mane.

Jim's Colt was in his fist, but he did not shoot. He backed Goldy around. Tina was staring with unseeing eyes across the shimmering distance. Smoke leaked from the muzzle of the gun in her hands.

The Lone Wolf whirled the big sorrel around and put him in a hard run after the piebald.

Vince came at a run across the yard. "Damn you!" he snarled at the woman. "You let him get away!"

Years of brow-beating, of smothered hate, of accepted brutality broke loose in the woman. She turned to face the man. In the harsh beat of the sun the sprawled figures of her two stepsons seemed unreal. *Damn you!* The curse rang in her ears—she had heard it hurled at her countless times. Too many times! The muzzle of Lee's Colt lifted and Vince stopped a few paces away, his face whitening at what he saw in her face.

"You fool!" he choked out. "Buck'll kill you for—"

The blast lifted him up on his toes. His eyes shocked wide as he twisted and fell.

The woman sat down. She could see the distant riders now—saw the two wagons rumbling behind. Buck Stringer was coming home.

She put the muzzle of the gun against her breast and pulled trigger.

Vince was still alive when Buck and the Hangnoose riders came into the yard. The boss of Hangnoose sat stiff in saddle, surveying the carnage—his men bunched around him, staring with shocked wonder.

Vince had managed to drag himself into the scant shade of the porch. He called out as Buck reined in and his brother swung out of saddle and strode to him, his face an iron mask.

He told Buck what had happened—he died telling it.

Buck Stringer glanced toward the far trace of dust marking Hatfield and his daughter's passage. He had to stop the Lone Wolf before he broke out of Crown Basin and warned Captain McDowell and the Rangers already on their way to their rendezvous.

He didn't think of his daughter. He'd deal with her when he caught up with her.

"Get fresh horses, all of you!" he ordered grimly. "He's headed for South Pass. Apache Joe'll hold him until we catch up."

He turned and headed for the corral, striding past his wife and his sons without a downward glance.

CAPTER X

Trapped

SOUTH of Hangnoose the land sloped upward toward Mexico. Broken Crown came in a curve from the north, shouldering the Basin, a wall of crumbly rock rising above brush-dotted slopes.

The piebald began to falter before it ran its first mile out of Hangnoose. Riding alongside, Hatfield saw blood spurting from the bullet hole just below the right shoulder, and he knew the piebald wouldn't last another mile.

He looked back over his shoulder. Buck and his men were coming into Hangnoose from the north. They'd be riding trail-weary horses, and Jim reckoned they would have to change mounts before taking up pursuit.

Goldy was running with easy stride, and Jim knew that without the added burden of Rosita, the big stallion would have little trouble keeping ahead of the men who would soon be on their trail. But he couldn't leave Rosita behind. The Lone Wolf had no illusions as to what would happen to her when Buck Stringer caught up with her.

The piebald's stride broke, he slacked off to a stumbling walk. His head hung low and his breathing was a ragged whistling. The girl cast a frightened look at Jim.

The Lone Wolf eased Goldy alongside the dying animal and reached out for the girl just as the piebald shivered. He lifted her out of saddle and set her down in front of him. The piebald slacked away from Goldy, stumbled, and went down, rolling heavily on its side.

Rosita clung to the Lone Wolf. He felt her softness against him, and her trembling. He muttered reassuringly, "We'll make it, girl." But he wasn't so sure. The big sorrel had amazing endurance, but eventually the girl's added one hundred and five pounds would tell.

Rosita Stringer buried her face against Jim's shirt, reaction making her shiver. She was leaving behind the only home she knew. And though Hangnoose had been rough and cruel, it had been home.

Lee was dead. He alone of her family had been kind to her, although there had never been any closeness between them. He had lived in his own private world, and now he was dead—killed by Mel. She shuddered and a little moan escaped her. *Mel.* She thought of her hulking half brother, of the cruelties he had played on her, even as a little girl. He had loved to make her scream, to hide her face from him.

Buck Stringer had ignored her. She meant as little to him as her rag doll. He had tolerated her, and punished her when she got in his way. She had early learned to shun the big, grim figure who had sired her.

Her mother, an inarticulate woman, she loved and despised. Loved her for the little kindnesses she had shown her—despised her for her humble submission to this intolerable life. Tina Stringer had been as stolid and emotionless as a machine. She washed and cooked for the Hangnoose crew, and when Rosita had grown old enough to help she had been forced into the same harsh bondage.

Only Milly, Lee's wife, had brought a touch of softness, of seeming gentleness, into this land of harsh men. She had lasted six months and then run off with a gambling man she met in Shawlee's.

Lee had followed her, and Hangnoose had become a harsh place again. Until Coley Prindle drifted in.

He had been different from the others. He was young and sensitive and dreamy, and he kept himself clean. He was wanted for murder in Missouri; he didn't look like a killer. But she really knew little about him, except that he had not teased her or tried to force her into the barn or made obscene proposals to her.

Cooley had been kind and polite and not pushing, and eventually he found her alone, one day by the spring. The earth had been warm under her and the smell of cool grass and the soft murmur of water would forever remain stamped in her mind. She had let him take her, and he had been gentle. And a hungering need had flamed up in her from that moment, so that she clung to him and knew that she could no longer stay on at Hangnoose.

She did not know how Buck found out. Her mind shrank from the memory of what had happened. She had fled from Shawlee's on this same golden stallion and met Coley just entering North Pass. They had turned back, and tried to circle south, hoping to elude the men on the rim. But they had not reckoned with Mel, or with Coley's gray horse which had given out.

Forced to rest, Mel had come upon them with his silent Indian tread. Coley had been shot before he could get his gun free. He was not yet dead when Mel had cut his throat, forcing her head up to see, and laughing with that ugly, insane laughter of his.

She moaned softly, feeling small and lost, and Jim sensed her feelings. He kept silent, knowing that only time could ease the ache in this unfortunate girl. Turning, he put his attention to the riders beginning to fan out of Hangnoose.

UP ON the east side of South Pass, where the land fell in a steep sliding pitch toward the Rio Grande and the mountain-locked country known as the Triangle, a small, cat-footed man kept his vigil. Apache Joe had a hermit's nature; he liked his own company best. He had a leanto on Table Rock, overlooking the gap through Broken Crown, which protected him from the elements, and food was brought to him once a week.

This was the south entrance to Crown Basin, to Buck Stringer's desolate em-

pire, and Apache Joe guarded its portal with loyal vigilance. A stranger coming through would be marked by a puff of smoke, Indian fashion, from Table Rock. A party of men rated three quick puffs, repeated at timed intervals.

From Table Rock the smoke signals could be seen at Hangnoose, and it was the method by which Buck Stringer could be appraised of intruders into his kingdom.

Apache Joe was coming down the sloping side of Broken Crown when he spotted the rider far below. Behind this double-burdened horse a dust cloud marked many horsemen—he squatted on his heels and studied the scene through quick, beady eyes.

Trouble seldom came from within the Basin; but he sensed trouble now. Rising, he made his way to Flat Rock and darted inside his leanto. He had a pair of Army field glasses there. He brought them out and put his attentioin to the nearer horsemen. The glasses brought Hatfield and the girl into clear focus. He recognized Buck Stringer's girl immediately and surprise flickered briefly across his weather-roughened face.

Swiveling slightly, he picked up the distant horsemen. He could not yet make out appearances, but he knew that the pursuers were Hangnoose men.

He squatted again, patiently, until he was sure that the double-burdened sorrel was headed for South Pass. Then he picked up his carbine and made his way to a jut of rock overlooking the Pass's approach. He squatted on his heels and made himself a limp cigaret which he stuck in a corner of his mouth. He did not light it. He waited until the rider was in clear view below, then he brought the carbine up to his shoulder and squinted down the glinting barrel.

The afternoon had worn away behind Hatfield. All at once the sun was a reddening ball on the far hills; its rays lost their brutal impact. The shadows came away from the near rises, invading the Basin with silent swiftness.

Goldy began to tire. He had carried the double burden too long, and now Jim felt the powerful muscles begin to quiver. The Lone Wolf looked back to the men behind and he felt the press of time on him, like a giant's hand. He had to get through. He had little doubt that Captain McDowell and his Rangers were on their way to the grim rendezvous in Placerita Canyon.

He felt the girl stir against him and look to the barrier looming up ahead. "To the left," she murmured. "South

"Fellow at the garage loaned it to me, I get around quicker now."

Pass lies there." And then she looked up into his face, fear stirring the darkness in her eyes. "Apache Joe, Jim. I almost forgot. He guards South Pass."

Jim stiffened. He should have guessed, from Vince Stringer's warning. Buck Stringer and twenty hardcases rode behind, slowly closing in—up ahead a rifle barred his way. The Lone Wolf's green eyes were bleak and foreboding as he weighed his chances.

The cut of South Pass loomed up ahead, dark and still, but the sun still lay bright on the steep rough slope of Broken Crown. Jim's glance searched the broken pitch under the barrier's rim. He saw nothing and for a brief moment he held the hope that Apache Joe was not at his post.

Then the carbine on the east wall opened up and lead splatted off the rock so close that Goldy shied violently and nearly unseated them.

Jim jerked the sorrel toward the temporary protection of off-trail boulders as another slug screamed just behind them. He slid out of saddle, jerking his Winchester free.

The girl clung to Goldy, looking down at him with big eyes. Jim unbuckled his saddle bag and reached inside for a box of rifle cartridges; he thrust it in his pocket and smiled reassuringly at the frightened girl.

"I'll keep him busy," he said sharply. "Ride, Rosita. Give Goldy his head and let him run. He'll take you through. You'll meet Captain McDowell in the town of Ciba if you ride all night. You've got to get to him before he leaves in the morning. Tell him about the trap waiting for him in Placerita Canyon!"

The girl started to shake her head. Jim slapped Goldy on the rump, his voice sharply commanding, "Go, Goldy!"

The sorrel leaped ahead. Jim whirled and sighted up the wall and fired at the puff of black smoke that preceded the rifle crack. He saw a small man slide away from the shelter of a rock, head back along the steep slope.

Goldy was still running. Jim saw the girl and the sorrel vanish into the blackness of South Pass, and he knew then that they were out of reach of the rifleman.

He made a break for the rise of Broken Crown, keeping boulders and brush between him and the rifleman above. He had little purpose now, other than to gain height from which he could temporarily stop Buck Stringer and his men from running Rosita down.

JIM headed for higher ground. Twice the rifle above him splatted lead almost in his face and each time he drove the man higher and further away with close-probing slugs from the Winchester in his hands.

Eventually he reached a point on the slope from which he held a commanding view of the trail below. He settled back here, with his shoulders against a huge boulder, a thorny bush screening him from below.

Somewhere above and to the left of him, he knew, Apache Joe was circling. But down on the trail Buck Stringer and the rest of Hangnoose were drawing close.

Jim slid the muzzle of his rifle over the lip of a small rock and tried a long shot at the big, thick-shouldered man leading the pack. He squeezed trigger just as one of Buck's men spurred up alongside the boss of Hangnoose. The outlaw took Jim's lead in the side and spilled out of saddle.

Buck pulled abruptly off trail, heading for shielding rocks. Jim sent two fast shots after him and then waited, a thin smile on his face. Below him the Hangnoose crew was breaking up, scattering for protection off trail.

For the moment he had the Hangnoose bunch pinned down at the entrance to South Pass. But somewhere above him Apache Joe was looking for him. The Lone Wolf knew it was time to move when a bullet brushed his shoulder and smeared a leaden blotch on the rock where his rifle muzzle rested.

He slid away to the left, making a running break for an old erosion crack in the

slope. Temporarily exposed, a half dozen rifles opened up on him from below. He made the cut without getting hit, but sweat chilled the small of his back.

How much longer would he be able to keep up this grim game of hide and seek?

The sun was gone now. A stillness lay heavy on the pitch of Broken Crown, as though twilight laid a quieting hand over the land. Hatfield kept moving, hidden by the narrow cut.

He climbed upward, a faint hope rising in him. It would be dark in less than an hour. If he could find a way up to the rim of Broken Crown it might be of help.

The erosion cut petered out against the crumbling rock face of the barrier. The remaining fifty feet to the rim were unscalable. Jim's face hardened with disappointment.

Then he saw the old game trail angling across the base of the rock. It looked recently traveled, and hope flared up in the Lone Wolf again. He cast a long look around him, searching for Apache Joe. He saw no movement. He had to chance it.

He came out to the narrow trail and crawled along it, heading at an angle along the slanting slope.

From a point above and to the right of Jim, Apache Joe glimpsed Hatfield just as the Lone Wolf slid down into one of the innumerable cuts scouring the slope below the rise of the wall. A smile cracked the leathery cast of his features.

He rose and waved to the hidden men below.

From the shelter of a trail-flanking boulder, Buck Stringer saw him. He scowled at Meeker, crouched next to him.

"What's Joe signallin' for?"

Meeker shaded his eyes. "Looks like he wants us to come up." He studied the play of Joe's hand. "I think he's got the Lone Wolf trapped!"

Buck spat into the sand. "We waited long enough!" he growled. "Let's go get him."

The path Jim followed was an old game trail taking the angle of the steep slope. He followed it along the base of the rock and hope built up in him that it would somehow lead through Broken Crown and tie in with the road through South Pass on the other side of the barrier.

At a bend in the trail, just before it entered a riven crack in the wall, he came upon a recently discarded cigaret butt. A hard suspicion crowded him now. If Apache Joe was ahead of him, the narrow cut could provide a half dozen opportunities for ambush. Yet he could not turn back. He could hear the Hangnoose bunch working up the slope. He was being driven into this cut, despite himself.

Gripping his rifle more alertly, the Lone Wolf eased into that rocky slit.

The crack extended clear through Broken Crown. He followed it to a rocky ledge overlooking the Rio Grande. And here he stopped. For the ledge ended abruptly, sixty feet above the brown, heavy turbulence below. Above and below him the rock wall was sheer.

He turned to face the narrow cut through which he had come. Now he knew why Apache Joe had not tried to cut him off. He was trapped here, with nowhere to go, except back through that cut which even now was filling with Hangnoose men.

He waited now, feeling the remoteness of this place where he was about to die. The river ran deep and sullen below him, hemmed in by the rocky cliffs, the shadows were deep in that narrow gorge. The Lone Wolf discarded his rifle and drew his Colts. The thought that Rosita Stringer had gotten away gave him meager comfort.

The minutes passed, and the shadows deepened. Then he heard the scuff of boots on rocks and he faced the cut, six-guns cocked.

Buck Stringer's harsh voice suddenly made its demand from the darkness of the slit in the wall.

"Hatfield! We know we got you cornered on that ledge! Throw down your guns!"

The Lone Wolf sneered. "Come out and

get me, Buck!"

An ugly silence followed. Then a shadowy figure broke out onto the ledge, followed by another. Jim's Colts cut them down. The first man spilled forward on his face; the second fell back and tripped the third man coming through.

There was a swirl of confusion and ragged firing, then Buck's snarling curses faded into the sullen stillness.

Jim reloaded and waited, a big man with his back to death. In the years he had worn the bright badge pinned to his torn shirt he had faced death many times —he had eyed it in the odd corners of this big and sprawling Texas land. He had never expected to die in bed.

Rock dust sifted down from the rim, warning him a split second before Apache Joe's slug lanced down. He moved like a startled cat, his right hand Colt booming and bucking in his fist.

Apache Joe heaved up, still clutching his rifle. He staggered and tripped and came down off the rim. He fell eighty feet and his body bounced off the ledge five feet from where the Long Wolf stood. He slid off and dropped, a limp and broken thing, into the sullen, heaving waters below.

Hatfield peered over the edge. He caught a glimpse of Joe's body as it came to the surface, pushed by some turbulence below, then it sucked down and vanished around a bend.

But something he saw just below the ledge brought a bleak light to his eyes. It was a long chance, he thought, but it was the only chance he would have.

He jammed his Peacemakers hard into his holsters, flung a last look toward the gash in the wall. The he stepped off the ledge and dropped sixty feet to the heaving torrent below.

Several minutes later Buck Stringer broke out onto the ledge. A half dozen of his men crowded after him.

They found the ledge empty. Hatfield's rifle lay discarded a few feet from the edge. But the Lone Wolf was gone.

Buck glanced down into the dark river. Daylight was fading fast—it would be dark in a few minutes.

He glanced up to the rim of Broken Crown. "Joe!" he called. "Did you get him?"

Joe didn't answer. A nagging disappointment turned Buck irritable. He was thinking of Cardona, waiting. Waiting for two hundred rifles—and Jim Hatfield!

Cardona would get the rifles. To hell with Hatfield. There were bigger stakes than the Lone Wolf. The Ranger was dead, Cardona would have to accept that. The Mexican rebel couldn't back out now.

He turned away from the edge. "Let's go. I reckon Joe got the Lone Wolf from the rim, just before Hatfield tagged him. Looks like they went into the river together."

ROSITA STRINGER rode through a dark, strange land slumped in Goldy's saddle. Weariness racked her slender body. She let the sorrel take his own way through this starlighted, desolate country bordering the canyon of the Rio Grande. Her will seemed locked in terror and uncertainty and only when she saw in the far distance the spatter of town lights did she rouse and show interest.

Several times the big sorrel turned and whinnied questioningly and she knew that the stallion missed the big man who had been left behind. She looked back at the dark barrier through which she had come and all that had happened since her flight from Hangnoose seemed a bleak and ugly dream, and there was nothing ahead for her but shadows and the night. She shuddered violently and clung to the golden mane of the sorrel.

The town lights vanished as she rode down into darkness—then Goldy shied away and snorted heavily.

Two men rode up out of the darkness, one of them reached quickly for her reins. She saw them in the starlight—dark-faced, stocky men with bandoliers crossing their shirt fronts.

They brought her, a half hour later, into a small canyon where a fire flickered,

hidden by the hemming hills. It was a big camp, although there was now only one fire. She sensed, as they led Goldy toward that blaze, that there were many men she couldn't see watching from the darkness.

Cardona watched his men bring her to him. He was squatting on his heels, sipping mescal from a small gourd. José Ferrito was standing just beyond, frowning.

The two men halted on the edge of the fireglow and one of them dismounted and pulled Rosita from saddle. José Ferrito whistled in thin surprise.

"It is Buck Stringer's girl, Cardona."

The Mexican rebel knitted unruly brows. He spoke to her, using a gutteral Spanish she understood.

"Where is your father?"

Terror kept her mouth closed. Her knees were weak. The man who had hauled her from saddle spoke harshly.

"She was alone. She seemed not to know where she was going."

José joined Cardona. "A trap, perhaps," he muttered. "I have never trusted Buck Stringer."

Cardona sucked at his mescal. His beady eyes had a long, thoughtful glint. "Perhaps." He put the gourd aside and took the knife from his sheath and held the blade over the flames. When it was hot enough he turned and walked to the girl.

"You will talk now," he said. His voice was soft as a woman's, as emotionless as Death.

Rosita shrank from him. She nodded, her words coming in broken pattern. She told him all that had happened since noon.

Cardona turned to Ferrito. His teeth gleamed white in the firelight. "We will wait for the Señor Stringer," he said. "Perhaps he will not be able to fulfill all of his bargain, eh, José?"

José shrugged. A small smile only deepened the harshness of his scarred face. "A bargain is a bargain, Cardona," he murmured, and turned to give orders, one by one, to the men clustered in the darkness beyond the fire.

CHAPTER XI

The Long Odds

CARDONA waited by the fire. He squatted on his heels, and he had traded the mescal for a long, crooked cheroot. His agate black eyes reflected the dancing flames. There was a long patience in him, and an acceptance of things—around him, in the shadows, was a stirring and shifting of men. But Cardona squatted on his haunches, alone with his thoughts and his dreams, with the long hot days and the dusty marches yet to come.

José stood alert and restless on the edge of the fire. Somewhere in the night a bird whistled, and he tensed and glanced toward the stocky, bushy-headed Mexican chief. Cardona looked at him and nodded and fell back to his brooding.

José Ferrito sighed.

Ten minutes later the pounds of hoofs signalled Buck Stringer's approach. They came into Cardona's camp, sixteen mounted men and two wagons rumbling behind.

Buck halted in the shadows. He put his hard glance on the Mexican rebel chieftan squatting by the fire—he saw José standing beyond—and he gave a quick start when he saw the small figure of his daughter near the sabre-scarred segundo. Relief lightened the gnawing irritation that had ridden him, but his relief faded as he caught the stir of unseen men beyond the fire.

He swung down from his saddle and strode toward Cardona, and he loomed big and solid in the night. He strode past the Mexican leader, brushed past José and stood over his daughter.

"Glad you picked her up," he said harshly. "I was afraid she might have gotten past you."

He put his hand on her shoulder and Cardona said, "You can have her—later!"

Buck scowled. "I'll take care of her now! She needs—"

"Later!" Cardona's voice held short patience. "The rifles?"

Buck jerked a thumb toward the wagons in the shadows behind him.

Cardona rose. He nodded to José who had not moved. The segundo headed for the wagons, walking through the saddle-weary, mounted Hangnoose riders.

Buck faced Cardona, sensing a controlled patience in this Mexican that warned him. He said grimly, "I said the rifles are in the wagons. With the ammunition I promised."

Cardona shrugged. "Then you do not mind if José checks?"

Buck choked back his anger. He felt the unseen men in the shadows, watching, and the weight of the odds against him. It had not occurred to him that Cardona would try to take things into his own hands, he had never rated the runty Mexican that high. A small man with a rabble following, a minor nuisance along the border.

His uneasiness stirred a sudden anger in him. "Don't push me, Cardona!" he warned harshly.

The Mexican made a gesture with his hands. He looked even smaller beside Buck. He looked like some comic character with his drooping mustachios and cartridge belts crossing his soiled white shirt.

"You promised me the Ranger Hatfield," he said mildly. "I do not see him. How can I be sure about the rifles?"

Buck's jaw was grim. "The rifles are in the wagons. I'm sorry about Hatfield. We had to kill him!"

Cardona's eyes glittered. "That was to be my pleasure."

"To hell with your pleasure!" Buck growled. "This is no kid's game we're playing, Cardona! Tomorrow morning Captain McDowell and his Rangers will ride into Placerita Canyon. An' the day after all of Triangle will be ours."

"Yours!" Cardona said mildly. He smiled at Buck's stiffening features. "I am not the fool you thought, Buck. The massacre of Captain McDowell and his Rangers will be blamed on that Mexican outlaw from across the border. Is that not so?"

Buck licked his lips. He had not planned it this way. But he knew what was going on in Cardona's head now, and a helpless anger quivered in him. He had underrated this man all along.

He started to back away. "You're a damn fool!" he blustered. "But if that's the way you feel—"

Cardona took the cheroot from his lips and smiled. That was the last thing Buck remembered—that white-toothed smile. From the shadows behind Cardona a carbine slammed. The bullet struck Buck in the chest, driving him back. He got his Colt clear before he fell, riddled.

The mounted men, caught in a crossfire, milled and cursed and fired wildly. The flurry lasted less than five minutes. Then a shocked silence came back into that Mexican camp.

STARS lightened the blackness of the river gorge. Against the damp cliff wall rising from the swirling current a figure moved. Chilled, dripping, Jim Hatfield searched for hand and toe holds in the face of that cliff, a stubborn and implacable urgency driving him.

It took him more than an hour to reach the ledge from which he had jumped. His arm and shoulder muscles ached with the strain—his fingers were raw and bleeding.

He hauled himself onto the ledge and lay there, his muscles quivering with tiredness. He listened to the night and the stillness, broken only by the rush of water below. He knew that Buck Stringer and his men were long gone.

It was a long chance he had taken. He had seen that the current swirled in an eddy below the ledge, he had chanced that no hidden rocks lay just below that dark surface. There was enough of an overhang to hide him from casual survey from the ledge, if he survived the plunge and came in close to the cliff—he had guessed right this far.

He was still alive. But he was afoot and bone-weary, and somewhere beyond Broken Crown Buck Stringer would be joining up with Cardona. And he knew, without questioning, that Captain McDowell

would be riding through Placerita Canyon in the morning.

Rosita might have gotten through, but the Lone Wolf tried to analyze his vague distrust. He couldn't be sure. And too much hinged on warning Captain McDowell.

He shivered as a chill struck through his wet clothes. He had to keep moving. He found his rifle where he had dropped it—his Peacemakers were still in his holsters. He picked up the Winchester and stepped over the bodies of the two men he had killed. Buck Stringer had not bothered with them, which indicated that the boss of Hangnoose was in a hurry.

It was harder coming down off Broken Crown in the darkness. Impatience tugged at him, and a growing urgency. He reached the road and turned to the Pass, and then he heard the horse snort in the darkness off trail.

He whirled, rifle swinging toward the sound.

Something moved among the boulders flanking the trail. Had Buck left one of his riders behind to make sure of him?

The Lone Wolf stalked the bulking shadow of the horse. He rounded a boulder and came up on his toes, eyes probing the gloom.

A buckskin horse stood over a sprawled figure, reins trailing. Jim remembered the man who had gotten in the way of the bullet he had intended for Buck. This could be the man. The bronc turned and looked at Jim and shook his head. Bit irons jingled in the stillness.

"Came back to him, eh?" Jim muttered. "He must have treated you pretty well."

The cayuse reached down and muzzled the dead man. Jim walked out into the open. His voice was soft, soothing. The buckskin watched him, rigid now. But he didn't break and run.

Jim reached him, took hold of the trailing reins. He patted the animal's flank. "One man horse," he said gently and looking down he saw that the dead man was Meeker.

The buckskin tossed its head as Jim mounted. It seemed reluctant to leave the body. Jim stroked the animal's neck, thinking of Goldy and the girl who rode him. He said softly, "Let's go now, boy. There's nothing you can do for him."

In the early morning hours just before dawn he ran across Cardona's night camp. The buckskin had stopped to blow and suddenly gone rigid, ears pricking the night. A horse had snorted softly and moved into sight. A saddled, riderless horse.

Jim rode close, rifle held ready. He came up and saw the Hangnoose brand on the animal and a frown built up in his eyes. He turned and rode slowly down into the canyon and came upon the sprawled bodies, men and horses, in the darkness.

The fire had died out and Cardona and his men were gone. There was only a deep silence and the grim evidence of what had happened.

Hatfield hunkered down beside Buck's body. "Rode into a trap you didn't plan on," he muttered, and wasted little time wondering why Cardona had broken with Stringer. Perhaps Cardona had wanted it this way all along.

He remounted and turned the animal toward the southeast. If the buckskin held out he might make Placerita Canyon before Captain McDowell rode into Cardona's guns.

THE boulder-strewn sides of Placerita Canyon were not so steep a man couldn't climb them. The road from Ciba ran through it. This was the way Captain McDowell and his Rangers would come—up from Ciba and across the flat plain and into the Canyon, on his way to the rendezvous south of Placerita where Jim Hatfield was to be waiting.

Since dawn Cardona had set his trap. Fifty men hidden on the slopes at the entrance to the canyon, the main body with him here, at the far end. Fifty men to bottle the remnants of McDowell's force when it recoiled from the ambush at the end of the canyon.

The wagons were in the shade of the cottonwoods around the small spring.

Rosita Stringer was tied to the wheel of one of the wagons. He wanted her out of the way until the fighting was over, he had other plans for Buck Stringer's daughter.

Now his men were at their posts, behind rock and brush. José was on the left flank, smoking, a quick, nervous man. Cardona chewed on his unlighted cheroot. He stood in plain sight, fifty feet from the wagons, and watched the far eastern rim of the canyon.

He had sent a man up on the rim to watch for the approach of McDowell's company.

Now he saw that ragged figure appear, limned against the morning sky, and hold his rifle aloft, making a sweep with it toward Ciba.

Cardona's eyes glittered. In the next hours he would pay for the death of his brother, for all the ill-fated skirmishes he had had in the past against Texas's border guardians.

One hundred yards behind Cardona, from the screen of a chokeberry bush, Jim Hatfield watched that ragged figure on the rim and knew he had arrived too late to warn McDowell.

Beyond the small spring a rope corral held Cardona's horses. Jim saw Goldy among them. The big stallion towered over most of the scrubby broncs of Cardona's rebel army.

Jim's rifle levelled on Cardona's back, his jaw ridging. Then he sighed. He couldn't shoot a man in the back, not even to warn Captain McDowell.

There was no cover between him and the wagons, and he made no effort to hide. He stood up and started walking toward the girl, his big hands hanging loose at his sides.

For half the distance to the wagons no one noticed him. All eyes were turned in the direction away from him. Then Cardona turned.

He was starting for the wagons, rifle held lax across his body. He took three easy strides before the tall figure impinged on his vision.

He froze, a strangely comical figure in tattered white shirt, shaggy hair. Buck Stringer had told him Hatfield was dead, and he had believed him! In that instant of inactivity his mind screamed a curse at Buck Stringer, then he opened his mouth in a ragged, wild yell and took his quick, aimless shot at the Ranger.

Hatfield's Peacemaker made its heavy, overriding sound. Cardona tripped and fell and rolled over once. . . .

José Ferrito turned with Cardona's wild cry. For a dragging interval he couldn't believe what he saw. The wide-shouldered Ranger he had seen last chained to a bunk at Hangnoose was running toward the wagon. . . . Cardona was a still, limply motionless figure in the small clearing.

Surprise held him, as it held the others on the slopes of Placerita Canyon. When he finally moved Hatfield was by the girl's side, slashing her free.

Ferrito broke from cover on the slope and ran toward Jim. He fired his carbine from the hip, saw his shot go wild, and slid to a stop, steadying himself.

Jim's voice was harsh in the girl's ear. "Make a run for it, down there past the spring."

Ferrito's second slug nipped his side, splintered through the wagon. The Lone Wolf spun around and cut down at Cardona's segundo and saw the man jerk to the impact of his lead.

THEN from the top of the Canyon, from both rims, a volley of rifle fire blasted down, searching and finding the men on the slopes. A wild, terrified confusion broke Cardona's men. They lunged up out of cover and spilled toward the canyon floor, heading for the horses.

The Lone Wolf caught Rosita's arm and pulled her back under the wagon. From the canyon rim tall, sharpshooting men came sliding, pouring fire into Cardona's fleeing men.

Hatfield recognized Wild Bill's figure among them. It didn't make sense. Captain McDowell and his Rangers should be riding upcanyon. . . .

With Cardona and José Ferrito dead

there was no leadership left in the Mexican rebel raiders' ranks. They broke and scattered, what was left of them.

Hatfield watched as Wild Bill regrouped his men. From the far end of the canyon came the sounds of ragged firing.

"Jim!" Captain McDowell's voice was anxious. "Jim, are you all right?"

The Lone Wolf nodded. He waited with Rosita by the wagons, a tired, puzzled man with the badge still clinging by a shred of cloth to his shirt. He waited for Captain McDowell to come to him.

Later, by the campfire, Hatfield listened to Wild Bill's explanation. "Hell, Jim, you wrote me that Buck Stringer and Cardona were teaming up. That you knew for sure that they would be camped at this end of Placerita Canyon this morning, and for me to come with all the men I could spare. You said this was our chance to wipe out both border gangs." He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a dog-eared envelope. "Here, read it yourself."

Jim read the letter Lee had put into Ranger code. Sawbones Smith had copied his handwriting well. Reading the letter Hatfield thought of Lee Stringer lying dead in the sun—he had believed in Lee Stringer's essential honesty, and the renegade Ranger had not let him down.

"You'll have to thank Lee Stringer for this," he said. He saw the puzzled look crease Wild Bill's face, and he knew he had a lot of explaining to do. "Lee was the one who coded the message and instead of writing what Buck wanted him to—to place you in a trap—Lee double-crossed his own blood and warned you of the trap instead."

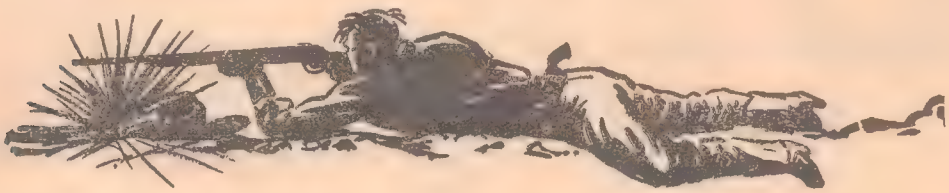
He made a gesture to Rosita, sipping coffee by the fire. "Take care of her, Bill. She's all that's left of the wild Stringers."

He closed his eyes and lay back against the grass, suddenly feeling very worn out and tired.

Captain McDowell frowned. A hundred questions crowded his mind; he shrugged. He saw the way the girl looked at Hatfield, a soft, wondering look—he reached in his pocket for his pipe and stuffed tobacco with a gnarled thumb.

Made a man feel good to get out into the field once in a while, he thought. He let his glance range among the hard-bitten men around the fire. His thoughts drifted. A thousand miles of Texas border—a big, hard country. Then he dropped his glance to Hatfield, stretched out beside him. He saw that the Lone Wolf was asleep.

Wild Bill sucked contentedly on his pipe. With men like this riding its long trails, Texas law and order was in good hands.



Coming in the Next Issue

GHOST-TOWN GUNSMOKE

An Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel, by JACKSON COLE

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THE BETTER MAN

A Fast-Shooting Novelet, by BARRY CORD

Buckskin Frank Leslie

a true story by George D. Wolf

NEAR the close of a summer's day in 1880, a dusty stranger rode a tired pony into the roaring frontier town of Tombstone, Arizona. He appeared to be a man in his middle thirties, of medium height, lithe and quick in his movements. His face was bronzed to the hue of tanned leather. He had a hard jaw and steel-gray eyes. He wore a fringed buckskin jacket and a wide sombrero. Blue army trousers were stuffed into Texas boots.

He was heavily armed. In addition to pistol and rifle, he carried a long Green River knife, the bone handle set with gold studs. The man was obviously a Long Rider, perhaps an army scout, and certainly a man likely to be master of any difficulty which might arise.

He dismounted at Fifth and Allen streets, hitched, and went into the Oriental saloon. After washing the alkali from his throat with two or three jolts of red-eye he looked the diggin's over. He found much to his liking. He reckoned to himself that he might stick around awhile. His name was Nashville F. Leslie and he stayed for nine years.

Yet, to this day it is not known precisely from whence he came, nor, for that matter, where his trail led to in the end. But his name was to become a topic of conversation in bars and by campfires from the Bavispe River to the Bighorn Mountains. No one can say for sure how many men he put under the sod. Some say twelve, others more, or less. Yet most agree that he was *mala hombre*. To this writer he appears the most real of all that coterie that lived and fought in old Hellrado.

There is considerable evidence that Frank Leslie served as a civilian under Miles; but the statement of Tom Horn—a man not always accurate—that Leslie served under Seiber in the Apache wars, remains unproved.

It is a matter of record that Leslie was a superior trailer, in a region renowned for its trackers. He was actually the first man called for duty by the sheriff under the writ of Posse Comitatus during his

hey-day in Tombstone. Leslie was also at one time sergeant-at-arms of Tombstone's Democratic Committee. That is, until his star set.

However, a fact about him not so generally known is that numerous Arizona Territorial frontiersmen, men really competent to judge, appraised Frank Leslie as the most dangerous man to ever set foot in the Territory. In his biography, Wyatt Earp said that of all the gunfighters he had known, none except Leslie could even approach the amazing speed and accuracy of Doc Holliday. Billy King, famed bar owner of Tombstone and deputy of Sheriff John Slaughter, has told how Buckskin Frank could hit a fly at thirty feet; how he could cut intricate patterns in a target with a pistol at thirty paces; and how he sometimes indulged in "figure shooting" at his girl friend's head, to her absolute terror.

Yet perhaps the surest proof that he was a man to be left alone lies in the fact that he scornfully strode throgh the bitterest feud in the toughest town in the land wholly unscathed and was not even once challenged. Yet, he wasn't nonpartisan. When the perfectly phoney Billy Breakenridge hired him to cut a false trail when in a posse trailing the Earps, he did so, for he needed the cash and he cared not a fig for the merits of either faction.

Shortly after Leslie's arrival in Tombstone, Milt Joyner hired him as extra bartender at the Oriental. Leslie kept an orderly house. He was an immaculate dresser in an era when it was fashionable to be unkempt. When sober he was witty and well-liked. He could tell a story in a manner that arrested the attention of any who were near. Even when on duty at the Oriental he wore a buckskin jacket. When drinking he was moody, at times savage and exceedingly dangerous. There was a pathological mania deep within him which alcohol invariably aroused. In time his heavy drinking, gambling, and free-spending increased to the point that he took up robbing stages for expenses to keep up the pace.

Yet had he been driven by a mere lust for wholesale loot as, for instance, Curly Bill, or if he had nourished an insane yen to kill like, perhaps, Clay Allison, then Frank Leslie would have been a terror indeed. As it is he casts a rather ominous shadow. In keeping order at the Oriental he was prone to "buffalo" a bad actor rather than kill him. Not, however, from any compunction of ethics, but to spare the house the tedius court arraignment that even a justifiable killing usually entailed.

Buckskin Frank had done some prospecting in his time; possibly also some hard-rock mining. He consorted frequently with the tough old Cornish miners—the "Uncle Jacks"—around Bisbee. Leslie possessed great strength in his arms. He is said to have been able to drive the point of his hunting knife through two four-bit pieces, one on top of the other. Joe Chisholm once heard Leslie make a wager that he could do so, but there were no takers.

Leslie carried his pistol in a unique way. He had a silversmith fasten a silver plate with a slot in it to the right side of his belt. Then he had him weld a small knob to his .45 just back of the cylinder. This knob and slot held his pistol free-swinging in a ball-and-socket joint. The old timers state that exhibitions in shooting that he sometimes performed were little short of astounding.

Although often mean and irascible, Buckskin Frank never forgot a favor. A prominent citizen of Tombstone who had lent Leslie money was one of the passengers on a stagecoach robbed by Leslie. Although it was night the two recognized each other by the voice. Later Leslie secretly returned the wallet of his benefactor—intact.

Frontier history remembers him mainly for the killing of Mike Killeen, Billy Claiborne, and Molly Williams. These affairs each mark a point in his stormy career in Tombstone, symbolizing the rise, the apogee, and the decline of his prestige.

Frank's killing of Claiborne was the last of Tombstone's more notorious gun-

fights. It was indeed unfortunate for young Billy that he chose to make a fight, while drunk, against the deadliest shot in the Territory who was stone sober and in a very bad mood.

Claiborne reeled into the Oriental on a November morning in 1882 just as Frank came on duty. Claiborne, spoiling for trouble, twice butted into a private conversation and twice was warned by Frank to take himself elsewhere. Instead of obeying, Billy turned on Frank a stream of vituperation. Frank grabbed Claiborne by the scruff of the neck and hurled him into a side room. The youngster who fancied himself a very dangerous man, was grossly insulted.

As he floundered out of the bar he muttered to Frank darkly: "I'll see *you* later!"

"As long as I'm in Tombstone," Frank replied, "you can see me any time."

Claiborne got a Winchester and a few more drinks and took up a stance across the street from the Oriental and announced to all and sundry that he was going to kill Frank Leslie then and there.

Frank was apprised of the situation. Taking his .45 from a drawer he stepped out a side entrance and approached his antagonist at a slight angle unobserved. Frank called to Claiborne, who whirled and fired two shots at Leslie from the rifle. Both shots went wild. Leslie fired once, striking Claiborne near the heart.

George Parsons, who witnessed the affair, recorded in his journal: "It was as pretty a center shot as I ever hope to see!"

The canard that Frank shot Claiborne *five times in the back* is entirely untrue. The Claiborne killing brought from Frank perhaps the most salubrious obituary ever recorded on the frontier.

As Frank returned his .45 to the drawer and turned to wait on the customers, he sighed and said, "He sure died nice."

Parsons records that during the affair Frank never even lost the light from his cigarette.

Like most of the notorious characters of the frontier, Frank has received his share of spurious folklore. One of the most persistent is the story that Ringo once confronted Frank with the insulting query—supposedly in reference to the Claiborne killing—"Did you ever shoot anybody in front?" Frank's alleged retort, "I take them as they come," can be safely scratched. It just didn't happen.

In the first place Mr. Ringo beat Claiborne to Boot Hill by four months, and in the second place, no one—and certainly not the habitual drunkard Ringo—ever talked that way to Buckskin Frank Leslie.

There is, also, a legend that Frank murdered Ringo. But there is no evidence whatever. Certain historians who have looked into the matter say that Johnny-behind-the-deuce had a better opportunity and a far stronger motive.

Frank's killing of Mike Killeen gave him wide notoriety. He was acquitted by the court after lengthy hearings, but it was a very unfortunate affair and marked the beginning of the end for Buckskin Frank. It seems that Leslie was courting the estranged wife of Killeen, a fellow bartender of Tombstone. Although not living with Mrs. Killeen himself, Mike caught fire at the sight of Frank squiring her around.

"I'll kill him sure," Mike threatened, and a friend to both men is said to have remarked to the distraught husband: "Well, in that case, you better dig two graves—one for you and one for Frank!"

But Killeen threw caution to the winds. One night Mike armed himself and hid on the balcony of the Commercial Hotel and waited the return of his wife and her consort to her room in the hotel. When the couple arrived, Mike let out a roar and fired at Frank at pointblank range. Mike missed and that was the end of him. Frank's shot came a split-second later. Mike fell dead, a bullet through his vitals. To show that he meant well, Frank later married the woman. However, they lived together for only a short time.

From this time on Frank's path was strictly downgrade; he drank heavily, went on berserk shooting sprees, and became vicious to a degree that made him

altogether unfit for his job at the Oriental. His boss, Milt Joyce, owned a ranch near the Swisshelms. He sent his ex-bartender up there to try and get himself together. But it was to prove of no avail. The very devil had got into Buckskin Frank. But he told Milt he'd go.

Frank set out for the ranch with a brand new girl friend, a blond entertainer from the Birdcage theater named Molly Williams—some called her Bradshaw—to ostensibly do a little light ranching. But in reality to do a lot of very heavy drinking. As a handyman Frank took along a dim-witted fellow named Jim Neal. Neal was nicknamed Sixshooter Jim because of the fantastic lies he told about his ability with a sixgun.

One afternoon while on a protracted binge Frank and Molly got into a violent quarrel which culminated in Frank shooting her to death. For once in his life Frank was really alarmed. He had broken an inviolable rule of the frontier—to say nothing of the statutes—and murdered a woman. Now he was really in for it! And tough old John Slaughter was sheriff. The act sobered him to serious reflection. In order to have the slightest chance to cheat the noose he saw that he'd have to get rid of Sixshooter Jim who was a witness to the killing.

Frank then very coolly pumped three bullets into the hired man and he fell like a poled ox. Frank lugged the two bodies outside the cabin and then went back to bed to try and "sleep it off."

Sixshooter Jim, however, was not dead. He managed to crawl to the ranch of Cy Brant, arouse him, and tell the story. Cy hitched a team to a wagon, bedded Jim in some straw, and set out for Tombstone at a full gallop to alert the authorities. Slaughter summoned his tough little deputy Billy King and told him to take two men and bring in Frank Leslie for murder.

"At the time," Billy later reflected, "that order seemed like a sentence of death."

But he went.

Meanwhile at the ranch Buckskin Frank tossed fitfully. He decided to go in and give himself up. With no witness to refute it, a likely story wouldn't be too hard to cook up. He rose, dressed, and saddled up, working out in his mind as he did so the tale he would tell.

However, about half-way to Tombstone Frank met Billy King and his party. King readily discerned that Frank suspected nothing and that he would play a careful hand. They greeted one another affably. After a few desultory remarks Frank asked King where they were headed. King said they were looking for stolen stock. Frank then remarked that he guessed King should escort him to Tombstone.

"How come?" King inquired.

"Well, I've just killed a woman," Frank said, "and I'm giving up of my own accord." King feigned a sigh. "Well, in that case we might just as well forget about that stolen stock and go with you back to Tombstone."

King secretly motioned for his deputies to bring up the rear, while Frank and King rode in the lead toward Tombstone. Frank was armed with a rifle and six-shooter. These weapons gave the posse no little uneasiness. This feeling was enhanced by a suspicion that Leslie was irked by the two who hung on his rear. From time to time he scowled as he gave them a quick glance over his shoulder. But he said nothing, for King's face was deadpan.

Leslie was a man who could sometimes be led but never driven; and just how to disarm him without arousing suspicion was uppermost in King's thoughts as they trotted along. As they drew near Tombstone King decided that the direct approach was the safest.

King said casually, "By the way, Frank, it'll look beter for all if you give up your arms before we get to town."

"You're right," Frank said, and handed King the rifle.

"Six-shooter also," King persisted.

Frank gave him a quick look, hesitated, then handed the weapon over. The posse drew inward sighs of profound relief.

But at the jail Frank was astounded to see the much-alive Sixshooter Jim on a cot in Slaughter's office. For a moment he was so enraged he could not talk—he had been trapped. He lunged at Billy King, and it took a number of deputies to get him into a cell.

At the next session of court—1890—Buckskin Frank Leslie was sentenced to Yuma for life. He was pardoned in 1897. It so happened that Johnny Behan was fated to be a warden at Yuma during his stay.

After his release from prison we get only fragmentary glimpses of his movements. Soon after his release from Yuma, a Stockton newspaper carried a story of his marriage in that city to a Mrs. Belle Stowell, a lady who had worked diligently in his behalf to secure him a pardon. With his reputation being what it was, the task was not easy, but Frank was always a man to pay his debts, especially to the ladies.

Only one time more was he seen in Tombstone. There came a day when he drifted into Billy King's saloon when on the way to Sonora as guide of a scientific expedition. Frank looked thin and rundown. King invited him to have a drink. He had several and the two conversed for a while on the old times that were no more. As the liquor went down, King saw the old fire return to his eyes.

As Frank turned to leave he said to Billy; "You know, I'd have given a lot to have known that Sixshooter Jim was alive that day I came in."

"Forget it, Frank," soothed Billy, "it was all for the best. Somebody would have been killed and it might have been you."

"All the same," he growled as he went out the door, "I wish I had known."

King never saw him again.

Fleeting glimpses come through of him in various places throughout the West, but they are indistinct half-images. To the very end there was an aura of mystery about him. There is some evidence that he went to the Klondike during the gold boom. Some say he acquired rather substantial holdings in the San Joaquin—only to lose all in the turn of a card! Some tell of his being in Vera Cruz, in Elko, Portland—anywhere and everywhere.

Perhaps the last true picture is given us by Myers who states that he was seen by Wyatt Earp in a West coast saloon in the 1920's—a broken down old swamper who was near to the end of his days—a man who had been either feared or respected in the toughest town in the West.

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Jonathan's long left sent the wagon captain staggering back

Desert Reckoning

By EDWARD CARR

WITH a gnawing sense of uneasiness Jonathan Fields pulled his long legs up under the blankets and wondered why the bugle hadn't blown reveille yet. Over the Humboldt Desert the dawn was already fingering the sky with gray. Even in the dim light, the sunken, rib-lined sides of his gaunt mules showed. Their teeth made a desperate, grinding sound on the chewed stubble of grass, trampled and gnawed to the root by scores of earlier wagon trains headed for California and the gold fields.

When the shrill notes of the bugle finally trumpeted through the dawn silence, the angular gunsmith unhobbled his mules and started into the arc of wagons that bent to the crescent of sod along the river bank. Detouring the scores of dead oxen with their bloated bellies and their sickening stench, he strode quickly to the forward point of the wagon train.

"Mornin' Piegan," he said with warmth to the old mountain man and scout the Grampton Company had hired back in Independence.

• • •

"Return to this wagon train," he was told, "and you'll be shot on sight."

"You sleep off from the wagons like that and some Ute or Digger's gonna lift your hair sure." The grizzled trapper spoke his words playfully, but his faded blue eyes deep-set in the wrinkled sockets were serious.

"Unless these mules get some decent grazing soon, it won't matter." Jonathan Fields gave the old timer a friendly poke on his buckskin shoulder and passed on.

The Grampton Company men were silent over their harnessing, grim looking before the harsh heat of another desert day, the tension of the hard Humboldt crossing showing in their eyes.

Abruptly the gunsmith shifted directions and swung wide of the next wagon. Through the wheel spokes he had seen the familiar flowered print of Amanda Caxton's skirt. Always when he encountered Brand Caxton's daughter there was that terrible self-consciousness and that shortness of breath. Even though he turned his eyes away, his memory pictured the auburn beauty of the tall girl on the far side of the wagon.

Back in Independence when the Company was laying in gear and equipment, he alone of all the Company he had voted against the Caxton family's being permitted to join up with them. He had spoken his objection with his usual blunt frankness: a young woman of Amanda Caxton's attractiveness would spell trouble in a wagon train.

That trouble hadn't broken out yet wasn't the fault of the Grampton men. From Aldous Pritchett, the Captain of the Company, on down, the men had made their play for her—except Fields. It was the girl herself, sensitive to the problem she created, sticking close to her wagon, that averted trouble. And her tartar of a father, ex-seaman Brand Caxton, mulish as the animals he drove, shared full credit. Even Aldous Pritchett with his lordly airs and the impatience of a recent widower hadn't gotten by the vigilant father.

Down the curve of wagons the clank of angle iron signaled the Grampton Company to assemble. Something was up. Jonathan roped his mules to the wagon wheel. He pulled the knot tight with an angry jerk and he straightened up his lean but muscled frame to its full six feet. He tought of Aldous Pritchett and his drawing room manners, standing up on his wagon making talk in his lordly, condescending way. The gunsmith's long fingers folded into fists.

"Damn his everlasting jawing," he said heatedly to Lin Digby at the next wagon. "We ought to roll while it's cool."

Digby looked anxiously at the rawboned gunsmith. "Go easy. One of these times you're gonna push Pritchett too far."

Jonathan laughed humorlessly. "You're all like sheep, saying everything Pritchett says. You think you're still back in Grampton where you got to check with the almighty Pritchetts to breathe."

Hans Blohm drifted over and joined in the talk. "After all, Jon, he's the Captain. Things is bad enough. We got to stick together."

"Sure, he can tell us all there ain't no time for dallying—there's a gold rush on. But he's got extra mules he can rotate on the wagons. And he's got a spare wagon of hay he bought up at Fort Hall. You let him push our mules any harder and they're gonna drop in the traces like all these stinking oxen did. Damn his pushing."

Digby put a restraining hand on Field's shoulder. "Hold your tongue this one meeting. Fighting won't help none."

The gunsmith opened his mouth to answer, but his throat tightened and no words came. What was the use? Grampton, Virginia, was owned lock, stock, and barrel by the lordly Pritchetts, aloof in their manor house above the town, yet here over a thousand miles past the frontier the Grampton men were kowtowing to the Pritchett name.

JONATHAN shrugged his shoulders and drifted with the crowd to Pritchett's wagon. With his rifle vised in his folded arms, he looked with smouldering resentment up to where Aldous Pritchett

and the Council members—John Rodgers, Joad Kunkle, Jim Gunder, and "Alarm" Douglas—were huddled.

Pritchett vaulted lightly up onto the wagon. He was in another fresh change of clothes, in striking contrast to the sweat-crusted, dust-grained clothes of the men crowded below him.

"Last night I had three bales of hay stolen," he announced in tones of patient hurt. "The Council has voted a search. Every man is to stay in place here until the search is completed."

Fields watched Pritchett and the Council members elbow through the Company and start in two groups down the half circle of wagons.

"Damn Pritchett's hay," the gunsmith said aloud. He made no effort to lower his voice. "He might have the common decency to share or to make loans before all our mules drop dead."

His rough cut face looked around the Company, searching the worried eyes for a response. There wasn't any answer. No one seconded the obvious justice of his comment.

Angry at the sheepish docility of them, Jonathan Fields looked away. He thought sadly of the poor devil in the wagon train that had taken Pritchett's hay for his skin and bone mules. Some poor devil like Tompkins, who, when he had lost his lead mules on that swift North Platte crossing, had stolen money from Pritchett's cousin, John Rodgers. Shrewdly, the bills had been marked in advance as a precaution and a search had turned them up.

Jonathan thought of Tompkins being driven off from the wagon train at gun point—because the constitution read that way, because Pritchett had insisted that the articles have teeth in them. He remembered his own angry but vain protests. Now another poor devil, driven to distraction and theft, was to be turned into the Humboldt Desert—on foot.

The gunsmith loked around the crowd again. The men avoided the challenge in his deep-set gray eyes. No one wanted his brand of trouble—the stubborn opposition he had made to Pritchett from the very start. Down the half circle the Company made around the wagon, his eye caught the tall suppleness of Amanda Caxton and the even breathing in him broke. Her father stood beside her, his pipe pushed belligerently into his thin lips, his feet shifting constantly as though to allow for rolling deck. Jonathan studied the salty old sailor and he thought with a puckish satisfaction of the night Brand Caxton, loud voiced and angry, had chased the suave Aldous Pritchett from squiring his daughter.

When the council came back, both Douglas and Kunkle were shouldering bundles of hay. The crowd spotted them and grew hushed. Eyes flitted anxiously to the faces of neighbors. Up on the wagon Aldous Pritchett was his usual unruffled self.

"The hay was found in the wagon of Jonathan Fields," Pritchett announced, his voice tightening in malice.

For a moment the gunsmith stood stunned, staring at the heads swiveling around and the shocked eyes bugging wide.

"Take his gun."

The rifle being wrenched out of his hands jarred him into awareness. His first reaction was sardonic amusement. "Some poor devil," he muttered.

Fields looked at the wall of staring eyes, their chill indifference already deepening into hostility. "I haven't been near my wagon since nightfall," he shouted up to Pritchett. "I bedded down out from the wagons."

The eyes stared back their disbelief. "I didn't steal his hay," the gunsmith shouted to the Company.

"We drive thieves out of this company," Pritchett called coldly from the wagon. "Give him his food, an extra canteen, his ball and shot and drive him out—like the constitution says."

The gunsmith opened his mouth to yell out that the hay had been put in his wagon, but the words stuck in his throat. Who would believe him? What proof had he? He didn't even know whom to accuse.

In a daze Jonathan took the sack that Rodgers thrust into his hands. He thought of Pritchett putting the hay in his wagon, but aside from his intuitive dislike of the man, he had no basis for his suspicion. What had the almighty Pritchett to gain? Yet who else. These were all Grampton men he had grown up with. He couldn't point to an enemy among them.

His mind a confused welter of thought, he took the gun thrust into his hand. The emptied rifle felt heavy, useless. Off beyond the Company he saw Piegan Sellers frowning, rubbing his whiskered face with his gnarled hand. He knew that he could count on the guide, but what could the mountain man do alone?

The gunsmith looked again at the crowd, alien now, visibly uncomfortable like official witnesses at a hanging.

"March him out," Pritchett ordered.

Fields felt the rifle prod his back and he walked forward, head high, shoulders squared, eyes blazing. His mind was confused, churning for a course of action, scorning the thought of asking any favor, even more time. He strode past the Company, past the arc of wagons, the darkness now lifting on the remote barreness of the desert that stretched before him.

"You come back, you'll be shot on sight," Pritchett called after him. "Like the constitution says."

Then only silence save for the crunch of sand under his boots.

"Hold on, Fields," Piegan Seller's cracked voice halloed him. The gunsmith turned. Sellers was walking out from the Company, his rifle at the ready, a challenge in his unhurried amble. He walked at an angle from the far tip of the crowd and kept his head turned toward Pritchett.

"Anything in that constitution of yours says a man can't say goodbye?" The old guide spat his red willow chaw contemptously toward the wagons and continued on to where Fields was waiting.

"Mite of a fix you're in," Sellers commented with matter-of-fact casualness. His thin voice was pitched low.

"I didn't steal that hay."

"I didn't figger you did. But whoever did is playing a pat hand. You ain't in no position to call. Not right now anyways."

Jonathan Fields looked gratefully at the lined face of the old trapper, at the thoughtful eyes with their pale fires.

"Stay out of sight. Come into camp right before dawn. I'll drift out past the forward point and have a horse for you."

"It was Pritchett," Jonathan said. "I know it was."

Sellers nodded. He reached a rawhide sack from his tunic. "Pemmican," he said laconically, tossing it to the gunsmith. Then he turned and started back to the wagon train.

"Thanks, Piegan," Fields called after him. He turned and resumed walking away from the river.

AT FIRST he walked aimlessly, preoccupied with his thoughts, the events of the last hour that had turned him adrift in the desert without the protection of numbers against the Diggers and the Utes. He reviewed his relations with each man in the company, one by one. But his suspicions kept jumping back to Pritchett, instinctively, like a compass needle turning to magnetic north.

The sun grew hot on his back. He walked on, using the vultures wheeling along the trail the oxen carrion made along the river, as a guide. On the lookout for Indians, his squinting eyes swept the empty land shimmering in distortion under the high sun.

When the sun arced to the west and the shadows lengthened, Fields angled closer to the river. He had to extend himself to draw abreast of the wagon train before the quick desert night fell. In the failing light he marked Piegan's position on the forward point against the low lying bluffs on the far side of the river.

The gunsmith moved as close to the camp as he dared, ate absently of the pemmican, watched the camp fires flame up, glow in the night, burn out quickly

for lack of wood. He tried to sleep, but the turbulence seething in him gave him no ease. There was a wrong done to him and its lingering hurt lay in his mind like the brush of a stinging nettle. He thought of Pritchett and his stomach knotted up in sickening tension.

Finally the willowy form of Amanda Caxton took shape in the phosphorescent darkness. He watched the proud tilt of her head materializing in the night and he pondered the strangness of his avoiding her as he had done. But what could he in honesty do when he had voted against the Caxton's being permitted to join the train. At last the gunsmith's fingers relaxed on his rifle stock and he slept.

Jonathan Fields awoke with a sense of alarm. He rubbed his eyes and knew that he had overslept. Glimmerings of gray already showed in the east. It was later than he should be starting into the camp. He thought of waiting another day before meeting Sellers, but the raw impatience in him roweled him to his feet. He kept telling himself there was still enough darkness to mask his movements, but the speed with which he moved toward the camp belied his confidence.

Close into the camp, Fields moved more cautiously, listening for sound, peering into the darkness for the deeper shadow of Sellers.

"You timed it skin close." Sellers spoke out of the darkness.

Turning, the gunsmith made out the scout squatting over to his left and beyond him was the clearer silhouette of his horse. Fields closed the distance and dropped down on one knee.

"What's new?"

"Nothing—yet."

Fields looked off through the fading night to the crescent of wagons. "It was Pritchett. I'd stake all on it." He could see the gray light in the east catch on the moist eye of the mountain man.

"Take the horse before the light picks you up plain and my story about Utes running off the only decent piece of horse flesh hereabouts won't hold."

"A horse just means I run better. But I don't aim to run. I'm going to have it out."

"Easy, boy. Pritchett's got 'em all on tight rein. Now you—"

Abruptly Sellers voice broke off. His hand reached out and grabbed Fields shoulders in warning. Then the gunsmith heard the sound also—the regular swish over the dry stubble of grass. Following Seller's movements, he crouched lowed to the ground. Out past the horse he made out the outline of a man's head and shoulders dim against the breaking gray.

The walking figure whistled a sea chantey to himself. Its vibrations carried in the morning still.

"Them dawn walks of Brand Caxton are gonna cure more'n his insomnia," Sellers whispered. "Some Ute or Digger's gonna take his hair for sure. Now you—"

Again Sellers' whisper cut off and his hand touched Fields' shoulder in warning.

Fields listened, but he heard nothing. He put his head lower to the ground. It was a softer, padding sound, more cautious than Caxton's footfalls. The gunsmith saw Sellers rise off his haunches and crouch forward in the direction of the sound. A lower, bent-over shadow moved into the darkness where Brand Caxton had gone.

Without a word Sellers moved off, following noiselessly Caxton and the shadow behind him. Fields kept at the scout's heels.

It could have been the scrape of morning wind over the dry stubble. There was a groan like sigh and a thud there was no mistaking. Sellers was running now, Fields right after him.

The still figure on the ground was Brand Caxton. The shaft of the arrow stood straight out of his back. Instinctively, Fields started running after the Indian, now fleeing without stealth, heavy footed, even noisy.

The gunsmith threw his legs out in long strides and ran hard. The footfalls in the darkness ahead of him grew louder, louder. The figure loomed distinctly in the gray dawn. Closing in, Fields saw

that the running figure wasn't an Indian. Excitement pounded in his chest and he sprinted faster.

The runner ahead of him was Aldous Pritchett.

THE gunsmith let his rifle slip to the ground and he dove forward with a rolling twist of his body into Pritchett's legs. He felt the knees jacknife under the impact of his shoulders, felt the body lurch forward, and thud against the ground. A heel kicked back into his stomach.

Jonathan lay clutching the twisting legs, gasping for breath. The legs jerked out of his grip. He threw up his arms to ward off the blows that Pritchet was raining at his head. As Pritchett got to his feet and drove his boot into Fields, the gunsmith caught a gulp of air and jumped to his feet.

Jonathan pistoned a long left and a right cross into Pritchett's jaw and he felt the face bones jar under his driving knuckles. He watched the wagon captain reel back, stagger, regain his footing, turn to run. Memory of the last day and the thought of Pritchett killing Brand Caxton to get at his daughter rubbed the savagery raw in Fields and again he threw a diving body block against Pritchett, slammed him to the ground, knelt over him and closed his fingers over the corded muscles of the neck.

All his pent-up anger went into the fierce pressure of his fingers. He could feel the quiverings of the choking man pulsing up the straining muscles of his arms. Suddenly his rage spent itself. The savagery in him broke, his arms went limp, and he straightened up over the coughing, eye-bulging face.

"Finish it."

Fields looked up and saw Piegan Sellers beside him in the advancing dawn. As he stared up, the shrill notes of a bugle cut the morning still sounding reveille.

"Finish it. Don't give a rattler quarter." Sellers' voice rasped like a cold wind off the desert at night.

The gunsmith moved his hands to the neck. As his fingers touched the jerking throat, he pulled his hands back in revulsion and got to his feet. Nodding to the line of wagons in the half light, now alive with moving figures, he said, "They can judge him."

Sellers shook his grizzled head in disagreement and swung his rifle on Pritchett. The gunsmith walked slowly back and recovered his rifle. His hands went over it with the loving concern of a craftsman.

They marched Pritchett back to the wagons in silence. At the first wagon Fritz Sollinger stared in open-mouthed surprise at them holding the captain at gunpoint. His excited voice halloed down the line of wagons. Men came on the run. While the company assembled, Sollinger and Jim Tate at Sellers' suggestion went out and carried Brand Caxton in. The old guide pulled the feathered arrow out of the bleeding back. The Company buzzed with angry talk.

Jonathan watched the quiet grief of Amanda Caxton and her mother over the dead man. He waited, reluctant to break in on their sorrow with his charges against Pritchett. He watched the pain in Amanda's eyes and his fingers tightened over the cold steel of his rifle.

Suddenly Aldous Pritchett bolted forward toward the massed Company.

"You take one more step and you're asking me to kill you," the mountain man snapped and Pritchett stopped in his tracks.

"This thief has come back," Pritchett shouted to the crowd. "On penalty of death and you all know—"

"It was Aldous Pritchett that killed Brand Caxton. Shot him in the back with an arrow," the tall gunsmith shouted angrily and he took a step forward.

"A Digger got Caxton. I was running after the savage when Fields jumped me," Pritchett argued. "He came back knowing the penalty. Now let's deal with him."

Pritchett sidled out of the direct line of fire between his captors and the Company.

"The first one of you that goes to lift a weapon gets it," Sellers drawled over

his leveled rifle. "This varmint killed Brand Caxton. Me and Fields were there. Just like he put the hay in Fields's wagon. Shot Brand Caxton so's he could—" The trapper looked off toward Amanda Caxton and he didn't finish the sentence.

The crowd shifted uneasily.

"You saw the arrow in him. It's clear as day it was an Indian," Pritchett shouted.

PIEGAN SELLERS stepped over and picked up the bloody arrow from the ground. "That's jest what he wanted us to think. But this ain't no Digger or Ute arrow. That's a Sioux shaft. Plankton Sioux. They were selling them at Fort Laramie. You'll likely find more just like it in Pritchett's wagon."

The color drained from Aldous Pritchett's face. "It's a lie," he yelled.

"I'll look," Jim Tate called and he started for the Captain's wagon.

Studying the faces of the company now eying him with open suspicion, Aldous Pritchett wheeled and started running toward the open desert. Jonathan palmed the butt of his rifle to his shoulder. Then abruptly he threw the gun aside and ran after Pritchett.

The gunsmith's long strides quickly overtook the running captain. His long arm shot out and pulled Pritchett around. Jonathan thought of Amanda Caxton as he hooked savagely at the wild face, hooked again, again, and saw Pritchett go down in a limp heap.

The crowd closed in around him. Jonathan watched the changed expressions on the faces of the Company: the shocked surprise, their sheepishness as they avoided his eye, the terrible grimness as their eyes fixed on Aldous Pritchett. When Jim Tate came up with the arrows from Pritchett's wagon and they compared them to the arrow that had struck down Brand Caxton, Jonathan walked away, leaving the Company to its own grim deliberation. Aldous Pritchett had writen his own harsh laws into the articles of the constiution; now he would have to suffer his own severity.

The gunsmith walked up the line of wagons to his own outfit. Overcome by the sudden reversal of fate, he gripped the still cool rim of a wheel and let the gratitude and the warm emotiones work through him.

Distantly he heard the thrust of shovels in the desert earth and the volley of shots as the Grampton Company meted out its grim justice.

Jonathan's reverie broke when the small shoes and the flowered print skirt glided into his vision. He looked at the pensive loveliness of Amanda Caxton. Her reddened eyes looked at him levelly, searchingly.

"Mr. Fields, could we pull our wagon in behind yours? Mother and I'll need some help with the mules."

"Certainly, do," he said. He wanted to say more, words of comfort, some expression of understanding, but the loveliness of the girl was like a hand on his throat. He gazed at the soft auburn beauty of the tall girl and he appreciated how a man could be tempted to murder to get her.

"I'm awful sorry about all that's happened," he said finally. "I'll harness up your mules for you."

"We'll do it together," she said, correcting him and fell in stride beside him.

Jonathan Fields stole another sidelong look at her and he glanced west to California and he wondered with a strange excitement what the future held.

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A NOVELET

MAN from

Nobody had ever successfully bucked the big Rocker V outfit,

THE sun had gone enough westerly to turn the dust film on the wide window all pink, and to lay a slab through the wide open door bright as a knife blade. The extreme end of the light shaft touched the low comfortable shoes, the stringy pantslegs, the long thin shanks of the man from Toronto.

"I can give you a place here," McNeighly said, looking up from the land

TORONTO

By AL STORM

but the new pilgrim, green though he was, refused to say die

plats under his soft hand. "It'd be very nice."

"And this is still open?" The man from Toronto pointed with a blunt scarred finger.

McNeighly looked and swallowed uncomfortably. "That's—that's Gus Vanstrom's land! No, I mean—"

"Oh, it's already taken," the man interupted.

"No," McNeighly said miserably. "It's unpatented land. It's just that Gus Van—"

"He has title?"

McNeighly shook his head. He was flushed and uncomfortable and perspiring more than the temperature warranted. Flinging a brief harried glance toward the tall thin man who lounged against the frame of the open door, he faced the man from Toronto.

"That is open land and may be legally filed upon," he said stiffly. "But I must warn you about the last three men who tried." This time when he looked toward the door, the man from Toronto looked too. The tall thin man who had been fashioning a cigarette had stopped and now stood quietly watching.

"My job states that I must be honest with you," McNeighly said quickly, facing the man from Toronto but speaking over-loud so there could be no question of the man at the door overhearing. "I must show you any and all lands open for homestead filing."

"Is it good land?"

McNeighly swallowed jerkily, pointedly avoiding looking toward the door. "It is good land," he said.

"Then I think I'll take it."

"I must warn you—" Despite himself, his glance fled toward the door. Finding the tall thin man gone, McNeighly wiped his face with a whispy white handkerchief. "For God's sake man," he croaked hoarsely. "That was a Rocker V hand."

The man from Toronto glanced once at the door, lifted and let fall his thin bony shoulders, and said, "Show me where to sign, please. How soon can I take over, I'm eager to get started."

McNeighly shook his head. "Don't even think—" He stopped, peered into the face presented to him, and pointed wordlessly, watching as the man from Toronto spelled out in a heavy square hand—Frank Pattman.

Afterward Frank Pattman stepped out onto the wooden sidewalk and stood regarding the swirl and roil of traffic through the single long street of the town. It was a good feeling to be putting down roots at last, even if the putting down was so far from home. He gave this some thought and then corrected it. This was home now. This tiny western settlement. Medicine Creek.

He would have to buy some horses, some tools, a plow. It came to him that he had neglected to ask about buildings and improvements. Probably there were some there, if the place had been filed on three times before. On the other hand, the land Commissioner had all but openly stated that the former filers had met with trouble.

He began walking slowly, reflecting on the significance of McNeighly's agitation. But the land was unpatented, open for filing. It would be his now. A sense of accomplishment ran warmly through him and he stretched his gait.

First the livery barn for horses, he thought. Coming abreast a wide recessed doorway, he had a momentary glimpse of the tall thin man who had been lounging at McNeighly's door. A shorter heavier man with a pitted face and slobbery lips stood with the thin man.

"Hello there," Frank said. The thin man looked at him and said nothing. The shorter, heavier man seemed not to see him and stepped out so that he almost collided. Frank slowed abruptly and only then did the squat heavy man look at him. At the same time his arm looped and a hard knobby fist drove murderously into Frank's unprotected belly.

Agonized shock ran through him. He doubled reflexively and the squat man clubbed with his forearm, the blow smashing down against the back of Frank's neck and driving him to the walk. Dimly through a haze of reeling senses, Frank saw the slobbery lips open to reveal wide square teeth.

"Don't ever call me that!" the man yelled savagely.

It didn't make sense. Frank waved his hand, shocked to find how weak it was, and tried to explain that there was some misunderstanding. He hadn't called the

man anything. He got to his hands and knees. "I didn't—"

Using his boot, the heavy man shoved suddenly, knocking him aside and down so that his face skidded along the rough sidewalk planking and peeled skin and flesh.

"You're getting off easy, you damned mud-grubbing clodhopper!"

MEN were coming on the run, drawn by the fight. Beyond them, standing motionless in his doorway, Frank could see McNeighly looking on with an expression of constrained horror on his soft round face. From somewhere the Land Commissioner's warning seemed to re-echo in Frank's head. He rolled to one side, then scuttled on hands and knees for half a dozen yards to get clear of the heavy man's boots. He understood now, McNeighly had tried to warn him.

Before he could get quite clear a kick caught him in the rump and pitched him off balance so that he went on his face again.

Then a voice called brusquely, "That's enough Raimey!" and Frank lay sobbing for breath, grateful for the respite.

He could see the man who had stopped it, an equally heavy but cleaner figure, a small nickled shield reflecting sunlight from his vest.

"He was mouthing off, he called me a name," Raimey said surily. "The next time I see him—"

The lawman looked down, and Frank said, "The man is a liar."

Raimey took a quick step forward, breath riffling from him in noisy gust. The lawman waved him back.

"Damn you, Frederichs," Raimey raged. "I ain't used to being called a liar by any root-turning mud-maggot."

Frank got to his feet, wincing at the pull of tormented stomach muscles. He felt half sick and still weak from the first unexpected blow.

Probably a dozen men were gathered around watching him. He looked from one to the other. There was no sympathy. Just an aloof disinterest. It came to him with a shock. Nobody cared. He'd been set upon and mauled unmercifully right here in the open of the street and nobody cared.

"I didn't start—" he began, then stopped. "This man Raimey, he works for Gus Vanstrom?"

Frederichs had been turning away. Now he stopped, a strange expression crossing his face. "Yeah, he does. Why? Do you know Gus Vanstrom?"

"Not yet," Frank said. "But I will. I filed on open land that Mister McNeighly said Gus Vanstrom wants to claim."

"So?" Frederichs's face was pulled in so that tiny ridges lay at the edges of his mouth.

"So that's probably why Raimey jumped me," Frank guessed.

Frederichs turned a speculative glance at Raimey, then looked back at Frank Pattman. "That is your lookout," he said bluntly. "The law plays no favorites." When Frank stood staring, uncomprehending, Frederichs suddenly snarled, "You knew that land would cause you trouble. You filed on it anyhow. Now you expect me to jump in and fight your battles for you. Well, mister, out here every man is expected to sink or swim by himself. If you can't take it, you'd better quit now."

"Get out of town, clodhopper!" Raimey said suddenly, viciously. "Or the next time we meet—"

"Shut up, Raimey!"

In face of Frederichs's bleak command Raimey became silent, but a mean triumphant grin twisted his slobbery lips as he stared.

He wore a gun slung low at his thigh, a shirt that was unnecessarily dirty. The opening at the throat showed wear-greased red flannel underwear. Frank stared at him steadily, making no sound. Frederichs started to turn away, then stopped.

"Get along all of you," he said. "This is all over now."

Frank Pattman stood motionless, staring steadily at the thick beefy frame of Raimey.

II

THERE was something pathetic in the way the man stood, as if he had come up against something entirely foreign to his way of life; as if, like some friendly collie dog newly in from the farm, he found himself ringed by mongrels and was undecided whether he was expected to flee or fight or what.

Agnes Moorehouse watched from the window for a time, then stepped outside and crossed to him. "Come with me," she said. "I'll help you get cleaned up."

She placed her fingers upon his arm, feeling the animal heat and the deep steady trembling that shook him. He turned quickly and she had the impression of eyes that were blue, and dark, and hurt looking with their fog of pain. He hesitated for a moment, then turned and followed her into Doc Runsey's office.

As usual on off-moments, the Doc was away fishing. Agnes decided that she would not need to send for him, and set about readying a shallow pan of warmed water, swabs, and an antiseptic salve. At the extreme rear of the office a man sat slouched in the Doc's wide padded rocker. His glance followed her, and once when she glanced at him she saw the wide fleshy lips lift in sardonic quirk.

"Sit here," she directed Frank, placing him where light from the front window would fall directly upon him. She washed at the torn flesh, sponging away the blood and grime, feeling him flinch. He made no sound and presently she was applying the salve. "It'll be sore, but I don't think there are any splinters," she said.

"Thank you. What do I owe?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I just didn't want you to think that everyone in Medicine Creek—" She broke off, confused by his growing smile.

"I need a friend," he said soberly.

At this the man who had been listening from the rocker stirred and stretched his long legs. "Don't assume too much," he said. "She's had her fun. Now get on out of here."

Frank's glance flicked briefly toward the rear of the office, came back to her, the smile dying. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"No." Despite herself and without having intended to, Agnes heard herself saying, "I'd like to be considered a friend."

The man came completely clear of the rocker now, the humor draining from his eyes. "Don't pick up every stray cur that comes to town, Agnes!"

Watching the man she had just tended, Agnes saw the bewilderment in his eyes again. She leaned toward him, said quietly, "That is Gus Vanstrom."

The torment was gone then, a strange icy blankness covering the eyes with a rapidity that startled her. Frank Pattman moved clear of her, facing Gus Vanstrom as Vanstrom strode forward on clumping heeled boots.

"It was your man that beat me," Frank said.

Vanstrom laughed. "You should have listened to McNeighly."

"The way to fight a snake is to ignore the coils and strike at the head."

It was a strange remark, and Agnes watched its impact on the Rocker V ranchman. His face twisted slightly, then suddenly went florid as the meaning drove home. He leaned forward, thrusting his face toward the slighter Pattman.

"Damn you, if you can't learn—" Vanstrom was cut short.

Frank Pattman's hand moved, scooped up a heavy glass jar that held the antiseptic salve, and brought it up in whistling swoop that exploded against the side of Vanstrom's long jaw. Vanstrom went down as though dead.

For a stunned moment Agnes stared blindly. Then shock and horror rushed into her, a sensation of biting fright. Pushing clear of Doc Runsey's littered table she dropped to her knees beside the fallen Vanstrom.

"You coward!" she cried, glaring up at the man she had just tended. "He wasn't looking for that! He'll kill you sure!"

"I wasn't expecting to be hit by Raimey either," Frank Pattman said. He examined the jar and then replaced it on the

table. "And if he tries to kill me, I surely will kill him in return."

The eyes were dark blue and pained. Agnes stared up at him, momentarily bewildered.

"I don't want to fight," Frank said. "But I can if I have to."

Vanstrom's breathing was gouty and there was blood coming from the inside of his mouth. Agnes reached for a gauze pad, stopped and peered apprehensively toward the window. If any of the Rocker V bunch chanced to look in, this odd little stranger wouldn't live another ten minutes.

"I'll tend him," she said. "Get out, please. Take the stage, no, don't wait that long. Get a horse."

FOOTSTEPS sounded on the walk just outside the door. She felt a cold panic and had a momentary impulse to try and hide Vanstrom behind her skirts, then knew the folly of trying.

"Please leave," she begged, and heard the door swing open, and looked up to see the sagging moonish face of Doc Runsey peering down at her.

The Doc quickly closed the door and then stood with his wide back blocking the way.

"He—Gus Vanstrom has met with an accident," Agnes said.

The Doc nodded owlishly. "So it appears." He glanced back over his shoulder once, and then stepped farther inside. "Your work?" He bent over Vanstrom without so much as a glance toward Frank Pattman.

"He thought Gus was going to beat him and he lost his head."

"No, that's not how it was." Frank Pattman shook his head, and Agnes stared at him in consternation. "I figured he was behind the attack on me. I wanted him to know how it felt."

Doc Runsey grunted. His fat blunt fingers probed the side of Vanstrom's jaw, felt inside the mouth, moved tentatively along the bone line already turning swollen and blue. "Teeth cut. Maybe broken jaw, maybe not. Either way he'll have trouble eating for quite a few days."

Agnes got to her feet. Her knees felt oddly weak. She had to back until her hips touched the table and gave her support.

"I still would like to be friends," Frank Pattman said. He was watching her and she didn't know what to say. He misunderstood her silence for he said then, his voice quieter, without the warmth: "I only know one way to fight, to win. I'm fighting for my home now. It means a lot to me. I'll fight for it the best that I can and in all the ways I know how."

Doc Runsey grunted cryptically, "That's the way most men fight when they've got something to fight for."

She didn't know. The wide hinged jaws that had made a V of Gus Vanstrom's handsome face was now bulged out of shape. He was a proud and violent man. When he awoke he would kill this mild little stranger who was having such a time understanding things.

"I'm sorry." Frank Pattman turned toward the door. She could see the raw scrubbed place on the side of his face. Beads of blood had seeped through the coating of salve. There must be pain, she thought, but he wasn't showing it.

"Can you shoot?" Doc Runsey had turned from his examination of Vanstrom.

Agnes couldn't remember ever having seen quite that expression on the Doc's face before. She listened intently, almost breathlessly, as Frank Pattman hesitated, then answered.

"I can handle a rifle. And I'm pretty good at quail," he said.

"A sixgun?" The Doc was matter-of-fact as though discussing splints for a broken finger.

Frank Pattman shook his head.

Doc Runsey sighed and turned to look at Agnes. "Get that belt and gun that Mex highrider left on his bill."

Agnes started. "They'll recognize it. They'll come after you."

"If they get that close, he'll be dead anyway. I'll swear that he stole it, and you'll swear with me or you'll be looking for a new place to work."

"Doc—"

"Oh, I forgot. You and Gus Vanstrom have about to come to an understanding, haven't you." There was an acrid distaste in the Doc's voice.

Agnes looked away, not wanting to meet Frank Pattman's startled glance. It wasn't that far along yet. She was furious at the Doc for intimating that it was.

"I'll get my own guns." The door closed before it registered on her what he had said. Then she started and whirled around, but Frank Pattman had gone, and in the doorway stood Sheriff Frederichs, looking past her at the inert Vanstrom.

"Thought there might be more trouble than you could handle," he said dryly, "but it looks like I was wrong."

III

McNEIGHLY had closed his door and gone into seclusion. Tom Frederichs, from his office in the jailhouse, stared down the street at the land office and wished bitterly that the Government would put troops into the field to handle its chores or else back out of the West completely. They gave the pot a stir then backed away for somebody else to clamp the lid on.

Pottery, owner of the general store at far end of the block, sauntered by and stopped with an elaborate casualness that was overdone.

"He ain't leaving. Reckon your troubles are about to begin, Tom."

Frederichs grunted, knowing who Pottery was talking about. He picked at the edge of his lip with a thumb nail.

"Bought ammunition for a rifle and a shotgun, but not for a beltgun," Pottery confided knowingly. "Funny things to buy unless a man was figuring on trying to stay."

"He's trying to stay," Frederichs said grumpily.

Doc Runsey came out of the Long Branch wiping his mouth and Frederichs crossed the street, angling to intercept the Doc.

"How is he?" Frederichs asked.

"How would any man be whose every tooth in his head aches and who can't open his mouth." Doc Runsey peered up at him. "He's sick now, but not too sick to be fighting mad." Abruptly the fat little Doc's face twisted as though he were grinning, but there was absolutely no humor. "Looks like you'll be dragged down off the fence now, Tom. The Rocker V bunch will kill themselves another man, and if you turn your back on this one everybody in the country will know for sure who's pulling the strings."

Frederichs reared back. "The Rocker V doesn't run my law office!" he snapped heatedly.

Doc Runsey blinked, unimpressed, and Frederichs cast about in his mind for something more to say, sorting over the things he might do, and carefully listing the things he'd better not do. Election was not too far off. Gus Vanstrom carried a lot of weight. By controlling his roughneck crew he made the job easier for a lawman. On the other hand there was a growing element that resented the cattleman's arrogant domination of the Medicine Creek area. A killing now would whip them into a fury that would carry right up to the ballot box. Maybe blast him clear out of office.

"Damn that fool clodhopper!" Frederichs said. "He can't hope to win, all he'll do is stir things up until somebody brings him in strapped across a saddle."

"Like Youngman, the last one who tried bucking Vanstrom!"

Frederichs stirred uneasily. "Nobody knows what happened there," he said defensively. "I tried to find out. A man found dead—nobody near—no telling where the rifle slug came from."

Doc Runsey turned away and Frederichs stood with his anger writhing inside of him. Damn that clodhopper, he thought, thinking of Frank Pattman. He won't last three days. But however long or short Pattman lasted, Frederichs knew that he had already lasted long enough to destroy all peace in the coming months. The moment he affixed his name to the land forms he had blasted apart the uneasy truce

Frederichs had labored so long to maintain.

A clatter of hoofs caught his attention and he looked up to see Bruce Raimey, Slim Echols, and Petey Newman heading out of town at a run.

"You fellows, wait!" Frederichs yelled.

He stepped out into the street, lifting his hand. They kept coming, not seeing him or ignoring him, and he had to backstep fast to keep from being trampled. While he watched, they came to an opening at the headend of the street and cut over, heading east, bearing in a fast slant directly toward the Rocker V and that wide valley of unpatented land.

An hour ahead of them, riding a gray gelding and leading a pack horse, Frank Pattman traveled at an easy jog trot. The sun had disappeared but its after-light filled the high thin air with a sparkling rosiness that gave a man the impression that he could see for miles. The grass was newly greening underfoot. There was a warming rich-growing smell to the air. He pulled a deep breath into his lungs and felt the pull of bruised stomach muscles. The reminder brought him about in the saddle to scan his back trail.

So far he could see nothing, but he was under no delusion that they would not come. Probably most of them, charging like so many mad bulls, all fury and pride and murderous power. Unconsciously his hand reached out and touched the rifle slung by a thong from his saddle horn. Unless they got him with the first shot, they would know they had been in a fight.

An hour later the land was fully dark and Frank was riding blindly across a land that had humped itself into a long series of benches. He had oriented himself as best he could in the last fading moments when he could yet see landmarks. Now he was riding only because he had found no good place to stop. He held the gray to a walk. A coyote began a shrill tormented wailing from somewhere to the left, and a chill raked down his spine before he could control it. By now he was well into Rocker V land. If he should miss that valley he had filed upon . . . A sound caught him, and turned him, and he reined in, slipping down to hold the gray's and the pack horse's nostrils as a small group of horsemen went racing by in the darkness.

LATER, when they had receded to a vague murmur of sound in the night, he climbed back in the saddle and turned to follow, lifting the gray to a gallop in order not to lose them.

Bruce Raimey leaned forward into the wind and cursed the darkness that kept him from seeing. He knew where he was, and the lay of the land on all sides, but the feathery blackness kept him from seeing the nester, and he wanted to see him. He wanted to see the distant figure wheel and discover them; he wanted to see him attempt to flee, then find it useless and pull in to wait. He wanted to see the man's face quiver and grow white as they bore down upon him and he leaped from his horse and grabbed the man and tore him from the saddle.

Bruce Raimey had few enjoyments on this earth—whisky, an occasional woman, the frantic terror of a good horse being beaten—but all faded before the relish he found in pummeling into pulp human flesh, or the sodden crack of bones giving way beneath his boots. Anticipation rowelled across him and he leaned forward, peering into the night.

Slim Echols leaned over to yell, "You reckon he found that valley?"

"Likely," Raimey growled back. "He got directions from that sniveling McNeighly. Likely he ran right out there figuring to hide."

They veered to follow along the bench for a way. The ground began sloping beneath them, and they wheeled in long looping arc to begin following up a flat shallow valley. A peel of moon came into view along the eastern rim. Its vague light began picking light and dark splotches from the space ahead.

Slim Echols reined near again. "Vancouver's there doctoring screw worm. Maybe he already stopped him."

A disappointment stabbed through Rai-

mey and made him ugly. "He had better not!" he snarled. "I want that clodhopper myself!" Echols didn't answer, and Raimey glanced briefly at Petey Newman riding to the left, a lean and solemn figure, a good man. Petey had kerosene-doused a nester shack once and touched it off without ever waking the nester. Remembering the screaming, Raimey grinned wolfishly and strained to see ahead.

The valley made a short bend and then straightened. Ahead a pinpoint of light marked an uncovered window.

Automatically the three fanned out, riding farther apart now. They bore down on the light with a rush.

"Remember!" Raimey yelled. "No shooting unless we have to!"

Echols answered something that was lost in the rush of wind, and Raimey tensed himself in the saddle. The light was stronger, closer. He saw a shadow cross before it. Then a wide thin slab of light reached out from the east side of the shack and he knew that the door had been opened.

Abruptly he began cursing, sawing viciously at the reins as though to vent his fury on his horse. Light from within the shack showed the man waiting for them, a skinny redheaded man. Vancouver.

"Have you seen the nester yet, Van?" Echols called while they were yet mounted, their horses not yet completely quieted.

The man called Vancouver squinted, shaking his head. "What nester?"

"One filed on this place again. He slugged Gus in the face with a club."

"Shut up, Echols!" Raimey stormed. He swung down and strode past the staring Vancouver, entering the squat square tar-papered shack.

Blankets showed at a bunk; there was a skillet and a coffee pot on the stove. Raimey paused, staring about the tiny shack with a raging fury gnawing inside him. The nester wouldn't show anymore tonight. He knew that. If the man hadn't made it by now, he would have to wait until daylight, being a newcomer and strange to the range.

Behind him, outside, Raimey could hear the low mutter of voices. Echols again, telling Vancouver all about it. Echols was always running off at the mouth. Abruptly Raimey raised his boot and shoved the stove off its legs. It rocked. He moved forward to throw his hip against it, knocking it over with a crash. Pipes came down. Soot billowed out.

The crash brought Echols and Vancouver to the door, and Raimey spun on them. "Smash it up! Burn it out!" he snarled. "That damned clodhopper thinks he's got a house here. We'll show him." He grabbed a table by the edge and sent it smashing against the wall.

A kerosene lantern was dangling from a hooked wire suspended from the ceiling. Raimey lifted it loose, twisting loose the cap to spill kerosene about the floor.

"Damn it, them's my blankets!" Vancouver yelled.

"Then get them!" Raimey snapped. "This place is going up."

Vancouver opened his mouth, closed it and crossed the shack to grab up an armload of blankets. He paused long enough to strip a jacket and ragged pair of pants from a wall nail. Echols's mouth was still open. Without looking at him Raimey flung the lantern against the corner under the bunk. Glass shattered. Spilled oil gushed out, a whipping lick of flame ran across it. Half a minute later the dried hay that had been used as mattress was crackling and pouring out thick smoke.

Raimey stopped at the door. Heat beat against his face and curled the flesh. Smoke smarted his eyes, but he had not yet expended the yearning for violence. He grasped the weather-dried door and wrenched it loose, tossing it inward into the crackling flames. "There, damn you," he snarled. "There's your blasted house!"

IV

A HALF a mile to the east Frank Pattman sat quietly, watching the geyser of sparks bloom and die as the roof caved in. He had seen the light and the open door and made a quarter circle to keep

beyond their reach. Then the fire and he understood now that there was to be no quarter. Vanstrom, or Vanstrom's men, had burned him out. He was left with only a piece of ground that their cattle would run over. Riders would patrol to keep him off.

For a time he slumped, but the anger started boiling up in him. McNeighly had warned him there would be trouble. The lawman had told him that he would have to sink or swim on his own. He looked at the fire, and at the tiny figures moving about just outside the glow of light. The jubilation at putting down roots, at finally accomplishing something, was no longer his strongest emotion. Anger had taken its place. Even the coyotes had stopped yapping, he noted absently. A faint breeze sifted over him, bringing the sharp acrid odor of burned tarpaper and charring wood. He shivered and then turned. Leading the pack horse, he began riding straight north.

There was no awareness of passing time. The valley pinched off at foot of a severely rising slope. Frank put the horses up it, hearing them grunt with exertion. Trees began spotting the upper reaches of the incline and he came to a level stretch where he paused to breath his mounts. The moon had turned dead white now and gave him a vague milky vision of greater slopes ahead, chopped by ravines, blotchy with timber that became a solid dark mat where it reached toward the mountain spurs.

Remembering the land plat as he had seen it, and the topographical map, Frank tried to figure his approximate position. He turned toward the right, following along the level space. Where it disappeared into a clutter of scrub brush and scraggly trees he cut down slope for a hundred yards, carefully tying his horses and caching his pack before moving off a hundred paces to spread his own lonely blanket.

With first graying hint of dawn he was up and moving. To the northeast a high peak glinted dully of naked yellow stone and he fixed it in his mind, angling always toward it. Two hours later he began slanting back toward the south and after a time came upon a high ridge which allowed him view of a long chuting valley that stretched away southward without limit that he could see. It was almost like the one he had filed upon, only larger, and was separated from it by the long rocky tree-mottled spur he had been the last few hours cutting around.

Frank spent some time studying the expanse of valley before and below him. Then slowly he brought his gaze in, taking careful notice of the cluster of buildings that lay close in against the slope flank where its lea would offer maximum winter protection. A small ranch house, a bunk house, two barns, and a scattering of corrals, Frank counted. There was a whisp of smoke from one chimney; nothing from the others.

A man came from a doorway, tossed dishwater on the ground, vanished back inside. Seeing this, Frank nodded silently to himself. He looked again at the valley and then began a slow wary descent of the slope.

Piegan, the Rocker V cook, was working sour dough, singing to himself, every now and then chuckling, when a sound brought his head around. A man stood in the open doorway and Piegan stood utterly still. He could see the raw scabbed patch on the side of the man's face. He didn't need to see the shotgun to know who he was.

"You alone here?"

Piegan nodded slowly.

"Where's the crew?"

"Part of them went in to town," Piegan said. "Most of them are over in the other valley waiting for—" He did not finish.

"Vanstrom with them?"

"No."

The man seemed to consider this, and Piegan slowly allowed his breath to flow out again. Now that his first start was over he took time to examine this stranger more closely. He didn't seem excited, or wildly angry, more like he was dead tired and too stubborn to admit it. Too stubborn, or determined.

"I lost the house on my land last night," the man said, speaking slowly as though wanting each word to be clearly understood.

Piegan nodded. Slim Echols had ridden in and told about it. Raimey and Petey Newman had stayed in the brush all night waiting for the nester, but Slim had ridden on in and gotten the crew.

"Vanstrom will have to pay for mine with his," the nester now said.

It made sense. Piegan waited, wondering how he figured in the man's schemes. There wasn't much hope in trying a play against a shotgun, but the cook wasn't about to go under without making some kind of effort.

He said stiffly, "Well, throw your matches and get it started."

The nester backed farther from the door. "Come outside."

PIEGAN hesitated. The shotgun lifted menacingly. He could see its wide gaping muzzle. He could see the man's eyes. Abruptly Piegan knew that whatever was to come outside, he wasn't going to argue in here. He walked outside.

"Stand in the middle of the yard where I can watch you," the nester said. "Don't try anything and you won't be hurt."

Piegan limped out into the center of the yard. He watched the nester sidle along the side of the house, then boot open the door. He watched the quick wary peeking which a man learns by instinct somehow when his life is at stake. Presently the nester came back.

"Burning is too easy. I want Vanstrom to see the ruins and to know why it happened."

Piegan scowled, trying to figure why the man was explaining everything. Damn it, he was in a war and making his fight. Wasn't that explanation enough. He shifted his feet to ease his gimpy leg and instantly the nester whirled, the shotgun coming up.

"Just sit down," he said. "I ain't eager to kill you by mistake."

Piegan sat. The nester eyed him. He walked to the edge of the house, eyed him again, and then suddenly disappeared. For a time Piegan considered getting to his feet and getting inside to a gun, but thought better of it. It would be like the canny son to be using this as a trap, as an excuse to use that blasted scattergun. Taking makings from his shirt pocket, Piegan began building a smoke, and presently the nester came back around the building leading a gray horse.

Taking a rope from the saddle the nester went indoors, presently came out playing the rope out behind him. Fastening the free end to the saddle horn he mounted and eased the gray into slow steady pull. The rope grew thin, twanged taut as a guitar string, and then there came a shuddering crash inside the house, and the rope had slack.

Easing up, the nester dismounted and went back inside. A second time he came out; a second time mounted and put the gray into a pull. Again there was a crashing tumult from inside.

After that it went faster. A loop dabbed over the chimney brought it down. Porch props were yanked awry; the porch roof caved in. A pry bar spread across the windows brought their casings out when the horse leaned into it.

Within less than an hour the house was a complete shambles. Piegan sat watching, feeling a strange admiration for the man's persistence despite himself.

"There," the man said finally, when a lever under the foundation had slipped the entire house awry. "Tell Vanstrom that finishes it. We're even. There'll be no more unless he does something more to me."

Piegan's cigarette fell into the dust and he took a long ten seconds picking it up. When he raised his head the nester was looking down at him.

"Do you think that ends it?" Incredulity made Piegan's voice uneven. "Do you think you can come in here and tear Vanstrom's house down to a pile of splinters and he'll take it?"

"I got hit, he got hit. I lost my house, he lost his house. If he does any more, I'll surely have to come back at him."

Piegan shook his head wordlessly. He drew a deep breath and seemed then to locate his misplaced faculty of speech. "Friend," he said fervently. "You've cut it. There ain't a thing in this world will keep Gus Vanstrom from killing you now. Nothing. He'll have your scalp if he has to string up for it the next minute. He'll have every man who can pack a gun out looking for you."

The nester listened soberly, unmoving. Piegan waited for a reaction. None came, and he exploded suddenly, "Damn it, didn't you hear me? No man alive can do to Gus Vanstrom what you did!"

"I hear you," the nester said. "Just tell him what you heard me say." He backed the gray half around, the shotgun across the loop of his arm. "Just keep sitting there until I get gone. I don't want any more trouble."

Staring as though he'd seen a two-headed snake, Piegan watched the nester ride off, turn out of the ranch yard, and begin the long hard climb into the badlands above the yard.

V

YOU can't kill a man for getting rattled," Agnes Moorehouse repeated. "That's for Raimey, or Petey Newman. You're too big a man for that, Gus."

She was pleading, a thing she had never done before, and for a moment it bothered her; then she put the objection away. Gus Vanstrom was sprawled on a couch, his face blue and swollen and ugly to see. The swelling had turned one eye black. Dispite liberal dosages of whisky she knew that he was in tense pain.

This pain showed in the viciousness with which he turned upon her. "Are you talking for my benefit, or for your friend?"

"For you, Gus." He turned away from her, staring straight up at the ceiling, and she continued quietly, "He's alone and strange to this land. You are the biggest cattleman around here. You can afford to ignore him. He won't last."

She saw that he had closed his eyes and she wondered whether he was even listening. Did he ever listen? He hung around, and pressed his suit, and at times could be utterly charming, but there was a cold hard core inside him which she could never soften. She thought of Doc Runsey's complete dislike for the man, and of Tom Frederichs's unashamed attempts to please. She remembered the calloused arrogance, the brutal ruthlessness with which he brushed aside whoever and whatever lay in his path. Instinctively she knew he was getting ready to say that he loved her. Why, then, was she so frightened now?

"Gus?"

He grunted, fumbling for the bottle of whisky that stood beside the couch. He did not open his eyes.

"Let this die. Don't press it. Show me that you can."

The whisky gurgled. He made no answer, did not open his eyes. A horse made fast pounding racket on the street outside, jumbled to an abrupt stop outside. She heard the clatter of boots and half turned in time to see Raimey burst in through the door.

"Gus!" Raimey yelled. "That nester pulled your house all apart. You ain't got nothing but kindling wood left."

Gus' eyes popped open. He came up off the couch, his face turning white then dark. Agnes felt everything sink away inside her.

"You got him?" Gus yelled.

Raimey shook his head. "He headed back into the Stonies. Slim and Petey and some of the boys are trailing. I thought you'd want to know."

The whisky bottle smashed against the wall. Gus's one good eye flamed. "Get my horse. Get whoever is in town." He went to the back of the room where a cartridge belt and gun hung across a chair back. Strapping it on, he whirled. "Get going, damn you!" His voice was so hoarse it was almost gutteral.

"Gus—"

He walked toward Agnes, arm half raised as though to strike, and she flinched away from him. There was a wildness in

his face she had never seen before.

Raimey ran to the door, then abruptly stopped. "Gus!" His voice had a strange whispered intensity.

Gus Vanstrom turned toward him, stepping outside the door, and Agnes moved slowly toward them, drawn by Raimey's strange behavior. She followed their staring along the street and felt her breathing come to complete stop.

A man was riding slowly toward them —the man! Behind him, following on lead, a bay horse carried the figure of a man tied face down across the saddle.

"Slim Echols," she heard Raimey breathe.

The man kept riding nearer, as though oblivious of the danger he was heading into. Agnes could see a dark splotch on his shirt that she knew must be blood. She could see the way he favored his side. Then Tom Frederichs was stepping out to confront the man and he reined in.

"He was shooting at me—wouldn't stop. I had to shoot him," the nester said to Frederichs. "There were some others, too." He seemed to notice Gus Vanstrom for the first time then, for he half twisted and looked directly toward them. "I'm sorry, Mister Vanstrom. But I told your men, if you keep on fighting—"

Raimey growled deep in his throat and leaped off the walk, running toward the nester on the horse. Tom Frederichs moved around to get between them.

"Stay back, Raimey!" Frederichs said. "This is law business."

Raimey's thick forearm caught him in the face before he could dodge and knocked him backward. Without even hesitating, Raimey lunged toward the nester. But, alarmed now, the man slipped from the saddle on the off side.

"Raimey!" Frederichs got up.

Gus Vanstrom yelled, "Stay put, Frederichs! You're out of this!"

Agnes saw that Vanstrom had drawn his gun.

FREDERICHS stood motionless. Raimey tried ducking under the horse, then swore and ran around behind it. The startled animal lunged ahead, quartering around, and gave Frederichs some protection. The nester was backing away and Raimey lunged at him. Frederichs, his gun drawn, leaped at the man and swiped his gun barrel down across his head. Raimey pitched forward stiffly.

"There! I told—" Frederichs began.

Vanstrom fired, and Tom Frederichs spun half around, completely shocked. In the second before he went down, Agnes could see the surprise in his face. She screamed.

The scream came to Frank Pattman as a background noise that didn't belong. He stared at the fallen lawmen, then across the street, seeing Vanstrom, and behind him the woman with her wrist pressed against her mouth.

His horse had bolted and his rifle was on it! He had no means of fighting now! Panic came to Frank Pattman and he whirled, starting to run. A bullet caught him in the thigh and threw him off balance so that he fell heavily against the side of a doorway, but he managed to roll inside.

Two men had been standing at a window watching. At sight of him they whirled and broke for the rear door. "Wait," Frank called. They kept on running.

Clawing to his feet Frank peered out and saw Vanstrom coming across the street, his swollen face glistening blue and ugly in the pallid light. Frank turned, hobbling for the rear.

Outside the two men had stopped but when he lurched through the door they took off like startled quail. "I need a gun!" Frank called. They seemed not to hear him.

He lurched after them, hobbling, his one leg gnawing like fire. Vanstrom would follow, Frank thought, and come out, and see him. Whirling, he plunged toward another rear door and thrust himself inside. He ran the length of the store. A clerk, caught staring from a front window, gaped at him.

"A gun, I need a gun," Frank said. The clerk stood dumb.

From the door he could see the street. His horse was not in sight. He couldn't see anything of Vanstrom. Fear suddenly became a choking thing. A gun— On sudden impulse he broke from the door and plunged into the street, angling across toward Doc Runsey's office. Vanstrom would be coming— He hobbled into the doctor's office and leaned panting against the littered table.

There was no one there. Frank drew a slow deliberate breath, forcing himself to calm, then began looking about the room. A sound at the door caught him and he whirled, hands grabbing for whatever on the table he could grab up. Agnes Moorehouse stood looking at him.

"I saw you come in here," she said dully. "What do you want?"

"That gun, the one the Doc was going to give me, the one that Mexican left him!"

She was pallid white, her eyes so round and dark they seemed strained from her head.

"No. You can't fight him."

"I've got to fight," he said swiftly. "My rifle is gone."

For a long moment while seconds ticked noisily from the Doc's battered old alarm clock, she stared at him. Then slowly she turned and strode to the rear of the room, delving in a wall cupboard that rose from floor to ceiling.

"Hurry, please." Turning, Frank saw Gus Vanstrom step from a doorway on the opposite side of the street and stand looking up and down.

She had a cartridge belt and holster in her hand. There was no need for belt or holster, Frank knew. Just the gun and what cartridges it would hold.

"You fire it like this," she said, showing him how to hold the gun.

"I know." He took the gun, saw that it was loaded, and stood with it.

Someone shouted at Vanstrom. Frank spun and saw him turn to stare directly at the doctor's office, then step deliberately off the plank walk.

He had to get outside. If Vanstrom caught him in here and saw the cartridge belt and empty holster, he would know that Agnes had helped him. Lurching on his wounded leg, Frank made it to the door.

Vanstrom saw him and shifted his gun. Frank made another step, and the hurt leg gave under him. In the moment of going down he saw Vanstrom fire. Then he was on the walk and rolling. Vanstrom fired again. Splinters seared into his face. He rolled again, flopping off the walk.

He came around, extending the gun full length, sighting it as he would a rifle. He saw Vanstrom running at him. The front sight wobbled, caught against Vanstrom's midriff and held steady for a minute. Frank fired. Through a haze of bluish smoke he saw the big form and fired again. A third time he fired before it came to him that Gus Vanstrom was no longer running.

While he watched, Vanstrom turned and took a wobbly uncertain step as though to walk away. Then abruptly he was down.

Behind Frank, in the doorway, Agnes Moorehouse stood watching. He rolled part way to see her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She nodded. There were no words. What had been had been, and a part of her life was dead. She looked at Gus Vanstrom sprawled limp, and at this man who looked at her with pleading in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said again; and she nodded unconsciously.

"Let me help you," she said slowly. "Come in. I'll send for the Doc." He was watching her as she stepped out to help him.

by
BEN
FRANK

Something held Lonny to the dead town — and it wasn't the ghosts

SHOWDOWN IN LONE VALLEY

HIS name was Lonny Carnes, and if you happened to meet him for the first time away from his tools, you'd likely think that here was a big stumblebum of a boy who didn't know enough to come in out of the rain. But the moment you saw him begin to build something with his strong, over-sized hands, you knew you were dead wrong. And after you talked with him for a while, doing most of the talking yourself, you realized that underneath his shyness lay a loneliness and unrest. And you couldn't help wondering what kept him here in Carnesville when everyone else had moved across the mountains to Brighton and the new railroad.

Although Lonny wouldn't tell you, he knew what kept him here, all right. He'd

known for a long time, and he was just twenty-two. He thought about it now as he put the finishing touches to a wagon box. Then, a sort of lost hopelessness giving his young, irregular face a look of oldness, he crossed the limestone slab floor of his shop and stood in the doorway, a big, smooth-muscled shoulder planted against the door frame.

Slowly, his troubled eyes moved over the scattered foundations that marked the graves of the few houses that had once stood in Carnesville. His grandfather had started the town, his father had built the small blacksmith shop, and Lonny had lived and worked here all his life. But these things didn't hold him here. It was the girl, Janie Donahue, who lived on the only ranch in the valley.

He'd gone to school with her when there had been a school in the village and he'd wopped anyone who had teased her. When others had deserted Carnesville, he'd stayed on to be near her. Someday, he figured, she might need him to fight for her again, and when that day came, he didn't want to be separated from her by mountains that offered only one uncertain pass to Lone Valley. And, maybe, someday—he didn't know when—but someday she might be free to become Mrs. Lonny Carnes, and together they could leave Lone Valley and live among old friends and neighbors once again.

He shifted his gaze to the nitch in the mountains that was the narrow pass. Snowing up there, he saw, and he was glad he was here and not in Brighton. Then the clatter of horses hoofs came to him. Stepping around the corner of the shop, he saw four riders approaching at a fast clip from the north. Funny how it was, somehow he knew then that the time had come when Janie Donahue needed his help.

Janie and her cousin, Cole, rode a little in front of the other two. Vaguely Lonny wondered how cousins could be so unlike. Janie was small, lovely, golden, gentle. Cole—big, dark, wild and troublesome. Then he turned his attention to the other two riders.

Strangers. Men close to thirty, he judged, with hard eyes and expressionless faces and low-hung guns. Somehow they gave the impression of riding herd on Cole and the girl. Watching, feeling the cold, damp wind against his face, Lonny felt a shiver of fear steal into him.

"Hello, Lonny," Janie said; and he saw that her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

Cole stepped to the ground. He had just turned twenty-one, and was handsome in a rough, tough way. Whatever feelings or fears he might have were hidden behind a swaggering manner.

"Old Jeff's dead," he said bluntly.

A start ran through Lonny.

"Grandfather Jeff, not old Jeff," Janie said, giving Cole an angry, reproachful glance. Then, to Lonny, "Mr. Beckman found him this morning at the foot of Indian Cliff."

"That's Beckman," Cole said, nodding toward the thin, red-headed man who had pulled his horse up beside the girl's mount. Then, grinning faintly at the squat, scowling man who had stopped behind Beckman, Cole added, "He's Hub Eckhart. Fellows I've known quite a while. Brought 'em to the ranch to help with building some fence."

Lonny shifted his gaze to the girl's face, framed by her soft, bright hair. Again he saw the expression of grief in her eyes. And something more. Fear.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had no idea Jeff was so sick."

"It was an accident," Janie said. "He's been feeling much better lately and doing a little riding. Sometime this morning, he rode too close to the edge of Indian Cliff, and he and his horse—"

She put her hands to her face and shuddered. Then, drawing a deep breath, "We want to make a coffin for him, Lonny. Can you have it ready by tomorrow?"

"I'll start on it right away and bring it over the first thing in the morning," he promised.

"Thanks, Lonny. Make it strong."

"I'll do my best, Janie."

SHE swung her pony around and, head bowed, began to ride away against the cold north wind. She had to cry some more, Lonny knew, and she wanted to do her crying alone. But Cole swung back into the saddle, and he and the two men trailed closely behind the girl. It was as if they didn't want her to be alone, Lonny thought angrily.

Frowning worriedly, he went back into the shop. He understood something of the fear and grief in the girl's heart. Old Jeff Donahue's death had freed her, for as long as he lived, she would never leave him. But now that he was dead—well, she and Cole were the only Donahues left. Without the old man's steadying influence, she wasn't sure what would become of Cole. Or of herself, for that matter.

All that afternoon and far into the night, Lonny Carnes worked to make a strong, tight coffin. As he worked, he remembered that old Jeff had fathered two sons. One—wild and reckless, a man who had been killed in a drunken brawl. The other—a decent sort, who had lost his life in trying to save a herd of cattle from a blizzard.

Cole was the son of the reckless man. Janie was the daughter of the other. Old Jeff had brought his grandchildren to the Lone Valley ranch when they were little more than babies.

Perhaps the old man had been too easy with Cole. Lonny didn't know the answer. He simply knew that Cole couldn't seem to stay out of trouble.

Scowling, Lonny began to smooth a pine board. He didn't understand Beckman's and Eckhart's part in the picture. But he did have a sudden hunch that they were part of Janie's fear. Tomorrow, he'd talk to her alone and learn the score. Then he thought of his father's old sixgun tucked away someplace in a dresser drawer and wondered if he shouldn't dig it out and take it with him when he delivered the coffin.

Slowly he shook his head. He wasn't very handy with a sixgun. And he could be wrong about Beckman and Eckhart being part of the girl's fear. . .

It was raining a slow, slanting drizzle out of the north when, the coffin finished, he crossed what had once been the main street of Carnesville to the two-roomed house where he lived. When he awoke, the rain had stopped, but the morning sky was a bleak gray mass of low-hanging clouds. He dressed, built a fire in the old range, cooked his breakfast. Sleep hadn't lessened his worry for the girl, or eased his dread of the two strangers.

The outside chill bit into him. Shivering some, he hitched his team to a wagon, loaded the coffin and headed northward toward the Lone Valley ranch. Mud made the going slow, and he didn't reach the ranch until almost noon.

Cole and Bix Beckman came out of the horsebarn to meet him. Cole stepped around to the back of the wagon and stood with his hands in his pockets, surveying the coffin. There was a faint smile on his lips, but his eyes seemed filled with shadows.

"A good job, Lon," he said. "Back your wagon up to the front porch, and we'll unload it."

Lonny backed around to the front porch. The squat, scowling Hub Eckhart came out of the house to help Beckman lift the coffin from the wagon.

"Thanks, Lon," Cole said, turning away. "I'll be around to your shop in a day or two to pay the bill."

Lonny glanced at the house. Beckman and Eckhart stood leaning against porch posts, watching him narrowly. He wasn't welcome here, Lonny knew, and he also knew he wasn't going to leave until he'd talked with Janie.

"I'll be glad to stay and help with the burial," he said.

"Grave's dug," Eckhart said shortly. "Don't need any help, do we, Cole?"

Cole shook his head and started to speak. But at that moment, Janie stepped out on the porch. Today she looked older than any girl of twenty should ever look, and there were dark shadows under her eyes. But she had a smile for Lonny as she came toward him.

"You must stay for dinner," she said. "I want you to stay for grandfather's burial, too."

"Thanks, Janie," he said quickly. "I'll do that."

TO HIS relief, no one said anything against his staying. A surly look on his round face, Eckhart took Lonny's team to the horse barn. Cole and Beckman followed Lonny and Janie into the house and stayed close by while the girl set the food on the table. Then Eckhart came tramping back into the house, and the five of them sat down at the round table and began to eat. No one seemed to have much to talk about.

Finished eating, Lonny pushed back from the table, but he didn't get to his feet. He sat there, watching Janie, hoping the others would leave them alone together.

No one left the room. Eckhart helped clear off the table. Beckman tipped his chair against the wall and lit a cigar. Cole finally went to a cupboard and got a bottle of whisky. He had two drinks and passed the bottle to Beckman. Beckman poured a shot into a glass and handed the bottle to Eckhart. After Eckhart had had his drink, Cole returned the bottle to the cupboard. By then, the dishes were washed.

"Guess we'd better get busy," Cole said.

They buried old Jeff Donahue in the family burial place on a tree-shaded grassy slope behind the house. Standing by, his big hat in his big hands, Lonny watched and listened as Janie read a few short verses from a tattered old Bible. Once her voice broke, but she'd finished with her crying, and there were no tears in her eyes. Only a look of fear that she tried to hide by keeping her head lowered.

I'll get a chance to talk to her when they start filling in the grave, Lonny thought.

But they were in no hurry to fill the grave. Cole and the two men followed Lonny and Jane back to the house. They let the girl go in alone, and then Beckman moved into the doorway and stood there, grinning faintly, his hand resting on his low-hung gun. Lonny knew then that he and Janie weren't going to have a chance to be alone. Without a word, he strode to the barn and got his team.

When he came out with the horses, Beckman still stood in the doorway. Cole and Eckhart had left the porch and now stood near the windmill, talking and scowling at each other. Lonny hooked the team to the wagon, climbed up on the sagging seat and headed back along the trail.

What could one man alone do in a deal like this? His gaze shifted up to the nitche in the mountains. Under the leaden sky, the snow somehow looked dirty and sullen. There was no escape from the valley for him and Janie. No way to bring in help. Whatever was done, he had to do by himself.

He glanced back over his shoulder and saw a squat man sitting on a horse at the top of a distant knoll. That would be Eckhart making sure that he kept his team moving homeward. Facing forward, he felt the beginning of a cold, wind-driven rain against the back of his neck.

Maybe, he tried to tell himself, he'd just imagined that Janie was frightened, that Beckman and Eckhart had taken charge of the Lone Valley ranch. Maybe he'd dreamed up the danger, because Janie meant more to him than anyone else in the world. Maybe—he shook his head. Trouble had come to Lone Valley, and Janie had been caught in the middle of it.

He was less than a half-mile from home when he first heard the distant sounds of running horses. He pulled up to listen. Riders were approaching his trail from the north-west, but he couldn't see them for the growing darkness and the crooked line of timber that bordered Lone Creek.

He drove on. He crossed the swollen creek and saw the black outline of his buildings. The shop, the small house, a lean-to barn. From behind came the

floundering sounds of horses running through swift water.

"Hey, Lon!" It was Cole Donahue's voice, slurred by the whisky he'd been drinking.

Again Lonny halted his team. A few moments later, Cole and Hub Eckhart emerged from trees and shadows and rode their blowing horses up to the wagon.

"Where's Janie?" Cole demanded.

Lonny stared up at the young man's face. Cheeks flushed. Anger and fear in his eyes.

"I've no idea. What's happened?"

"We left her at the house when we went to fill in the old man's grave," Cole said. "When we went back to the house, she was gone. She'd taken a horse and a saddle."

Cole nudged his horse up close to the wagon and stared into the empty box as if he expected to find Janie hiding there.

"One thing's for sure, Lon," he went on, "she can't get out of the valley. We've just come from the pass. It's blocked with snow."

Lonny felt his fear and dread grow. "Why would she want to leave the valley like this?"

"The old man's death has upset her," Eckhart spoke up. "She acts like she thinks Bix Beckman and me had something to do with it." He laughed shortly. "And me and Bix wouldn't hurt anyone, especially an old man, would we, Cole?"

Cole didn't answer the question. "Drive on, Lon," he said.

Lonny prodded his team into a walk.

"It's a bad night for a girl to be out," Eckhart said, "and we're worried about her. Cole tells me there's only one other place beside the ranch where she can find shelter. At your place, Carnes."

LONNY had already thought of that and suddenly he was afraid they might find the girl hiding in one of his buildings.

As they moved along the empty street, he wanted to ask questions. But he knew he wouldn't get any straight answers, so he kept quiet. In front of the lean-to barn, he climbed stiffly from the wagon and began to unhook the team. Cole and Eckhart dismounted and went into the barn. It took them but a minute to see that Janie and her horse weren't inside.

"You can unhitch later, Lon," Cole said. "Let's look in your house."

"You two stay out of my house!" Lonny said angrily.

He moved in front of the men to block their way. Cole cursed and swung. Lonny took the blow on his left arm. He went in low, hammering Cole's ribs, driving him back against the wagon. It was a fight he could have won in a hurry if it hadn't been for Eckhart.

The squat man came in from behind, clubbing with his gun. After that, Lonny didn't have a chance. He went down on his knees, and Eckhart sent him sprawling with a kick to the small of his back. By the time Lonny could stand on his feet, Cole and Eckhart were inside the two-roomed house.

Lonny staggered to the door and went into the kitchen. The two men came in almost at the same moment after a hasty search of the bedroom.

"How about the shop? Eckhart asked in a hard, flat voice. "You going to try to keep us out of there, Carnes?"

"You won't find her," Lonny said. "Her horse isn't here."

"You talk too much," Eckhart broke in. "Get a lantern, and let's have a look in the shop."

Cole unhooked a lantern from a wall peg and lit it. Heads ducked against the rain, they crossed over to the shop. While Lonny stood in the doorway, still groggy from the kick, Cole and Eckhart explored the small building. Scowling, they came back to where he stood.

"We'll find her," Eckhart said. "We'll find her if we have to take this damned valley apart!"

"Listen!" Cole said hoarsely. "A horse!"

"Douse the light," Eckhart ordered. "The girl won't come near if she sees us."

Cole blew out the lantern. Listening, Lonny heard the rider approaching rap-

idly from the north. In the darkness, he began to ease away from the door. This was his chance to make a run for it. To warn Janie that she was riding into a trap.

"Hold it, Carnes!" Eckhart hissed.

The next instant, the squat man's gun barrel came crashing down on Lonny's head.

Fighting against the pain and sickness, Lonny tried to stay on his feet. He couldn't. He tried to shout a warning to Janie, but he couldn't do that, either. Then, from where he lay, he heard a man call, "Eckhart, Cole, where are you?"

"It's Bix Beckman!" Cole said in surprise.

Beckman rode up and dismounted.

"The girl's horse just came back to the ranch," he said. "With the saddle under his belly!"

"So she's a-foot," Eckhart said with sudden satisfaction. "That makes our job a lot easier. Shouldn't be too hard to pick her up when daylight comes."

"We'd better get back to the ranch," Beckman said. "She might take a notion to come home."

The men moved around the house toward the barn.

Listening, Lonny heard them mount and ride away into the night. At last, he staggered to his feet, found the lantern and re-lit it. Stumbling a little, he crossed the street and circled the house. A sudden feeling of black despair settled over him. The men had taken his horses. They had made sure that he didn't ride in search of Janie Donahue.

LONY had been lying sprawled across his bed for a long time, but he was still wide awake when he heard the sound at the door. Heart pounding, he sat up. The sound came again—someone was knocking lightly. Quickly, he crossed to the door and swung it wide.

"Lonny!" Janie cried.

The next moment, she was in his arms, clinging to him, sobbing, shivering with the wet and cold.

"Lonny," she said, "my horse got away from me, so I started walking here. If it'd been dozen rods farther, I'd never have made it."

Suddenly, she became a dead weight in his arms. He carried her to an old rocker and wrapped a blanket around her. Then he built up the fire, doing it in the dark, for he was afraid someone might be watching the house from a distance. After this, he made her eat some hot food and he gave her some of his old clothes and left her alone to change into them.

When he returned to the kitchen, he could see her outlined dimly by the light from the fire. The too-big overalls and shirt made her look ridiculous, but Lonny was too worried about her to notice.

"There's so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin," she said. "First, I dropped a small package just outside the door. You'd better get it for me, Lonny."

He went outside and found a small, slicker-wrapped package lying in the mud. He carried it back into the kitchen and laid it on the table.

"Money left to me by my father," she explained. "Almost ten thousand dollars. Grandfather Jeff never trusted banks, you know, and he's kept it for me in an iron safe in his room all through the years."

"So that's what Beckman and Eckhart are after," he said.

Janie dropped down on the creaky old rocker and covered her face with her hands. "Yes. I hate it, Lonny! If it wasn't for this money, grandfather would still be alive." A sob escaped her. "At first, I thought his death was an accident. Then I overheard some talk that made me suspicious. So I slipped away to the top of Indian Cliff and saw where another horse had crowded Grandfather's horse too close to the edge. Beckman rode that other horse, Lonny, for Eckhart was around the house all morning. Of course, the rain's washed the tracks away by now."

As she talked, Lonny began to get the picture. Cole, gambling and losing to Beckman and Eckhart. He knew of the money in the safe, and told the gamblers

about it. He likely promised that he'd get it and pay off his debts.

"But they didn't trust Cole," Janie said. "They came to the ranch, and Cole pretended he'd hired them to help build a new fence. I accidentally heard them talking about all this shortly after you left the ranch, Lonny.

"I know now that grandfather didn't believe Cole—that's why he changed the combination of the safe and told me but didn't tell Cole. The rest I can only guess.

"Evidently when Cole admitted he couldn't open the safe, Beckman and Eckhart planned to do away with grandfather. They had to make it look like an accident, or they'd run a chance of having trouble. They're the kind of gamblers, Lonny, who don't gamble. They bet only on a sure thing."

Lonny went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. He could feel her trembling.

"Better wait till morning to tell me the rest," he said.

"No, there's not much more. I thought of giving the money to them. That if they had it, they'd go away and leave Cole and me alone. But after I heard them talking, I knew it wouldn't work out that way. As long as I was alive and able to talk, they wouldn't feel safe. So when they went to fill in the grave, I took the money from the safe, saddled a horse and started for Brighton. I didn't have time to find a saddle bag and had to carry the package. On the trail, the horse shied at a rabbit, and I dropped the package. When I got off to get it, the horse got away. It wasn't my pony—they've hidden my pony someplace. Lonny can you help me get to Brighton? To the sheriff?"

"Sure, honey," he said. "But right now, you've got to rest. Tomorrow morning will be soon enough for us to head out of here."

He said it confidently, as if escape were possible.

Janie took him at his word. She believed in him. She stood and touched his face with her slim fingers.

"Ever since I can remember," she said softly, "you've done things for me. Why, Lonny, why?"

But before he could think of the right thing to say, she said, "I think I know why, Lonny." Then she turned and ran into the bedroom and shut the door.

He went over to the window and stood looking out into the darkness. The rain had stopped, but the wind was blowing and the night was as black as pitch. He tried to think of some place of safety in the valley. There wasn't any such place. At last, he stepped to the table and lifted the slicker-wrapped package. Maybe this was the answer to a way out for Janie and him. Maybe it wasn't. Only time would give the right answer.

He opened the door carefully and listened. Nothing but rumble of the swollen creek and the rattle of a loose board. He slipped out into the darkness and groped his way into the shop. Using a chisel, he pried up one of the flat stones of the floor, scooped out a shallow hole with his hands and put the package into it. After that, he carefully replaced the stone and covered it with dirt and pine shavings. When he crossed back to the house, he was surprised to note that the wind had shifted to the east.

JANIE was still sleeping the sleep of the exhausted when the three riders came like ghosts out of the morning mist and rode into the deserted street. Young Cole led the way, his hat pushed back on his black hair, a surly expression on his dark face. Beckman and Eckhart rode close behind him, their faces hidden by the wide brims of their hats. This was it, Lonny knew, the showdown. Tucking the old sixgun under his belt, he stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Cole said, "I reckon Janie hasn't shown up here, Lon."

Lonny nodded coolly. "She's inside, asleep."

Startled, the men sat up a little straighter in their saddles. Then Beckman said, "Wake her up and bring her out here. We want to talk to her."

"What for?" Lonny grinned faintly. "Have you broken into the safe and found that the money's gone?"

He read the answer in the tightening expression on the thin, hard face.

"You going to bring her out here?" Beckman demanded.

Lonny shook his head. "She needs the sleep."

"I'll get her," Eckhart said.

Lonny eased the gun from under his belt.

Eckhart settled back in his saddle. "Don't be a fool, Carnes," he said tightly. "You don't have a chance."

"Nope," Lonny agreed. "But I can make you kill me before you get Janie."

Eckhart glanced at Beckman, and Beckman dropped a hand to his low-hung gun. Time was running out fast, Lonny knew, but this wasn't the time to hurry matters or show fear.

"It's beginning to rain up there in the mountains," he said quietly. "That means the pass will be open by morning and that folks will be coming to the shop for their work. If I'm not around, they'll think something is mighty funny. Killing a man with bullets isn't quite the same as riding a man over a cliff. Bullet holes don't look accidental."

Beckman laughed shortly and freed his gun. "Maybe they won't find your body."

"In that case," Lonny drawled, "maybe I'd better make one other point clear. Janie can't tell you where the money is. I'm the only one who can do that. You see, after she went to sleep last night, I hid it. You couldn't find it in years."

The red-head's thin face twisted in sudden fury. Swinging around toward Cole, he said viciously, "You told us this was going to be easy. Now what have you got to say?"

Cole had dropped a hand to his gun. There was no fear in his eyes now.

"I say you're a dirty double-crosser!" he said hoarsely. "You said that if I brought you two here as ranch hands, no one would get hurt. That you wouldn't rush things—and you murdered old Jeff!"

"Try to prove it," Beckman said.

"I got a better idea!" Cole said, lifting his gun.

Beckman's wrist moved, and his gun roared. Lonny saw Cole keep his saddle by clutching the saddlehorn with his free hand. Then Lonny saw Beckman's gun level for a second try.

Lonny squeezed trigger then, and Beckman lost his balance and went floundering under the feet of his horse.

"Eckhart, Lon!" Cole gasped.

Lonny flung himself flat and heard the crash of Eckhart's gun and the slap of the bullet against the house. He saw Cole lose his grip on the saddlehorn and roll to the ground. And out of the corner of his eye, he caught the lift of Eckhart's gun.

"This is it!" Lonny thought, bracing himself for the shock of the bullet.

Then, somehow, Cole Donahue found the strength to squeeze off one more shot. Hub Eckhardt coughed sharply, clutched at his chest and died.

THEY stood side by side in the deserted street of what had once been a town, a big awkward boy and a small, golden girl, watching the rain.

"The pass will be open by morning," Lonny said, breaking the silence.

"Then, what?" Janie asked.

"A doctor for Cole," he said. "Word to the sheriff to come for the bodies."

"Cole's going to get well, isn't he?"

Lonny nodded. "I'm sure he will."

"I'm glad," she said. "There must be some good in him, Lonny, or he wouldn't have turned on the men when he learned grandfather had been murdered."

"I wouldn't be standing here, Janie, if it hadn't been for Cole. I won't forget."

"Nor I." Her eyes met his shyly and fell away. "Now that grandfather is gone, there's no reason for me to stay in Lone Valley any longer, Lonny."

He looked from the scattered stones of the old foundations to the pass that led to the outside world and knew that his loneliness had come to an end. The new town of Brighton with its new railroad and this girl, Janie, by his side—all this and much more belonged to the future.

Dan hit Burke and drove his head back against the building

Gunfight In TOWN

By PHILIP MORGAN

THERE was quite a crowd in town for the dance. Dan Temple reined in at the rack in front of the Palace Saloon, taking the last place. He stepped from the leather and moved quickly to the walk, already a little late. But he held up as he saw Nancy Bellows come from Harrison's across the street. His attention sharpened at once and admiration for her stirred him.

She was a tall woman of thirty, brown-haired and full-bodied and she moved with quiet grace. He saw the admiring glances the men gave her and he saw the scornful, haughty looks of the women. It was always this way with her in this small

Dan Temple had to decide about a woman—and about a man out to kill him

town. The women distrusted and disliked her and refused to be decent to her. Therefore, Nancy Bellows showed the town a strict gravity of expression, a coolness, a seeming indifference.

Dan turned and crossed the street and stepped up on the board walk ahead of her. He pulled off his hat and smiled as she stopped before him.

"I want to talk to you, Nancy. Where will you be in a little while?"

"I have to go to Mrs. Paisley's for a dress fitting, Dan. I'll be there for an hour or so." Her expression had subtely changed at the sight of him. A smile touched the corners of her lips, broadening her wide mouth and softening her entire face. Her brown eyes were warm and she was much prettier.

He said, "I'll be along in a little bit," and cut back across the street.

Before entering the Palace, he glanced back and she was watching him with a slightly worried expression. He waved to her and went into the saloon, going directly through the big room. He knocked at the door to a rear room and then opened it and stepped through. The two men sitting at the round-topped table in the back room looked up quickly as Dan came in. Their faces showed instant relief at the sight of him.

One of the men, Ben Hedrick, ducked his big head briefly and allowed a tight smile to turn his thick lips. Homer Lowe, small and nervous and dark, did not smile. He stood and ceremoniously shook Dan's hand and resumed his seat. His expression was very grave, almost sad.

Dan, who was a big man of twenty-nine, with the plain stamp of the cow country on him, took a chair and poured a drink from the bottle on the table. He took the whisky neat, shuddered slightly, and waited for the other two to speak. Hedrick spoke out at once, his ordinarily hearty voice held to an undertone.

"We might as well get on with it, Dan. You know why I asked you boys to meet me here. We've got something to decide, the three of us, because we control the basin. Now, do we let Mint Snider ruin us, or are we going to do something about it?"

Dan Temple did not answer at once. His big forearms rested full out on the table before him and he stared broodingly at the whisky glass in his hand. His face was somewhat somber in repose. The white track of an old scar showed along his cheekbone, adding to the melancholy cast of his face. When he spoke, his voice held a considerable regret.

"We've all lost cows, Ben. More than any of us can stand. We have to do something and we all know it, but it doesn't make the chore any pleasanter."

Ben Hedrick controlled five hundred thousand acres of grazing land and fifty thousand head of cattle. For forty years, his word had been law in the Ute Basin and he was accustomed to the power. He was an intemperate, impatient tyrant, who had always bulled his way through trouble.

But now he was getting old and in a rough land, where great strength was important and weakness a sin, he had lost much of his power. That much was evident from the mere fact that he had called for help in this. In not much older days, Hedrick would have taken care of Mint Snider without help or advice. Now he was too old to reach for a gun and beat any man, so his position was altered. Hedrick recognized the fact, but refused to alter intolerant attitude.

"I don't feel any pity for a cow thief," Ben said after a short pause. "Mint Snider will look good hanging at the end of a rope. I don't see what all the worrying's about."

I wish," Dan answered softly, "that everything was black and white for me, like it is for you. To me, there's a mighty thin line separating Mint and the rest of us."

"Is there any other way, Dan?" Homer Lowe asked quietly. He was a thoughtful man, a transplanted Easterner who had none of Hedrick's arrogance. "I'd be willing to take my losses up to now if we could just run them out of the country. Do we have to kill them?"

Dan said soberly, "I don't see any other way, Homer. Mint won't scare. He's a crook, but he's no coward. He'll fight you and if you're weak, he'll whip you. Run him out and tomorrow he's back."

Hedrick slammed the table top with the flat of his big hand. "Good, then it's settled. We smoke them out and we hang then in a row. It isn't the first time I've had to do it."

"I don't like killing," Lowe said regretfully, but resigned.

"I don't either," Dan replied. "Especially when I have to do it. Mint and I never got along, but I won't enjoy putting a rope around his neck. Well, have your men at my place tomorrow night after dark. We'll ride in on 'em the next morning at dawn."

"Why not tomorrow morning?" Hedrick asked at once. "Let's get it done now that we've decided to do it."

"I'm going to the dance," Dan said. "I can't go in the morning. The next day's soon enough." He got up from the table and left the room without further talk.

THE moment he came out into the main room of the saloon, he saw Mint Snider. The rustler stood at the bar with two of his men, Long Tom Burke and Willie Matoon, having a drink. For a moment, Dan thought Snider wouldn't see him, but then the big man seemed to sense that someone was watching him and raised his head.

Seeing Dan, his attention sharpened immediately and the smile faded from his face. Dan moved up to the near end of the bar and ordered a drink, silently hoping that Lowe and Hedrick would tarry in the back room. Behind the three rustlers, Bill Layneson, Dan's only hand, rose from a poker table and hurriedly moved in. At that moment, Hedrick and Lowe came from the back room and passed from the saloon, deep in talk. Snider straightened at once and stepped away from the bar, his expression bleak. He laid his cold gaze on Dan.

"You boys been havin' a little powwow, Dan?" Snider asked in a cool, even voice.

"Something like that," Dan admitted, his voice as cool and soft as Snider's.

Snider thereupon laid out his flat warning. "Don't do anything you'll have cause to regret, Dan."

"I never have regrets," Dan replied without heat. "When a thing's done, it's done for good or bad. I never beat a dead horse."

He walked out of the saloon then, putting his back to Snider. Mint was not sure, not yet cocked, but a premonition of danger touched Dan's spine with its cold chill. Mint Snider talked soft for a big man and he smiled often, but that didn't hide the bald fact that he was deadly when aroused.

Having Snider see Lowe and Hedrick leave that back room was bad. It tipped their hand to the rustler, who was a wild animal, living as much by instinct as any cougar. Mint didn't jump into things and right now he was trying to figure what was happening. When he had it figured, Dan could expect a fight.

On the walk outside, Dan put Snider from his thoughts. He turned down the walk toward Paisley's Dress Shop, in a hurry to see Nancy Bellows. She had been much in his thoughts lately. He came through the door of the shop and hauled up, seeing Ben Hedrick's wife and daughter, Betty. They glanced up at his entrance and showed an instant surprise. He smiled at them.

"Hello, ma'am, Betty."

They returned his greeting a trifle breathlessly and he realized with a distinct shock that they thought he had come in to ask Betty to go to the dance with him. Before the situation became too embarassing, he walked past them to where Nancy Bellows was studying herself in a full length mirror. When they saw that he had come to see Nancy, the Hedrick women gave him scathing looks and hurriedly left the shop. Nancy had watched all this in the mirror and turned to Dan now, her face troubled.

"That wasn't smart, Dan. You're accepted as an equal, but if you insist on being seen with me, you won't be. Mrs. Hedrick can hurt you, if she wants to.

You should have asked Betty to go to the dance."

"I'm taking you to the dance," he said flatly. "Would it help any to know that I've been waiting for this day like a kid waits for Christmas?"

She colored slightly and sighed. "It would help me a great deal, Dan, but I'm still worried about you. The women here have no use for me, because I own the Palace. They talk about society in the East, but the rules here are far more strict." She was very serious and resentment for the way she was treated moved Dan.

"Why should they be rough on you? They aren't any better than you."

"They thing I'm wicked, because of the saloon. It isn't their fault. It's the way they were raised. Then, they're a little afraid of me."

"Why afraid?" he asked, honestly puzzled.

"I run the saloon and their husbands come there. They don't know what goes on there for sure, but they suspect the worst. They would like to get rid of the saloons, but they can't, so they take out their resentment on me. To them I'm in the same class as a percentage girl—or worse."

"That's rotten," he said bitterly, "and I don't like it. You're nicer than any of them."

"Thank you, Dan. You're very kind. I only wish they would let me show them that I do have a few of the social graces. Maybe if I sold the Palace, they might let up a little, but I doubt it even then. I'm just not their social equal." She paused and turned from him.

When she spoke again, he realized that she was very close to tears. "What they don't know is that I hate owning a saloon. When Jack died, all he left me was the Palace. I have to keep it going in order to live. If I sold out, the money would soon be gone and I don't know what I'd do. This way I'm independent and that's important to me."

He reached out and caught her shoulders and turned her around. He brought her in close to him and gazed into her eyes.

"It doesn't really matter what they think, Nancy. I know what you are and what they think doesn't change anything. I came in here to ask you to go to the dance with me. Now I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. Be ready to go at eight."

She blinked back tears and smiled for him.

"You're nice, Dan. I hope they don't hurt you."

He grinned, made reckless by her nearness and by the anger he felt because of her treatment. "If it should hurt me to take the prettiest woman in town to the dance, then I'm hurt."

He bent his head and kissed her quickly on the lips, something he had never done before, and then he wheeled and walked swiftly from the shop.

She watched him go and her expression was wistful and full of hope. But then she shook her head, as if at the foolishness of her thoughts would shake away, and the strict, grave expression returned.

DAN went down the walk, intending to stop at the barber shop for a shave. Bill Layneson was indolently resting on the porch of the Palace and cut across the street to head him off. Layneson's face was half-wild and he seemed to be silently laughing. His eyes, so bright and alive, showed Dan that he was on the narrow edge of violence.

This Layneson was a tough one, forty years old, a man who had drifted all over the West and had seen too much trouble. His past was cloudy and he never talked about it. Dan knew little about him, except that he was a good hand with horses and cattle and was loyal to the core. Layneson stopped on the walk beside Dan and grinned.

"We got a fight on our hands, I'm thinking Snider smells something. I thought maybe he might start it there in the saloon."

Dan shrugged. "It's too bad he had to catch me with Lowe and Hedrick, but it couldn't be helped. We're riding against

them morning after tomorrow. They're holdin' some of the rustled stuff in a pocket five miles back in the hills behind Tanner's."

"I hope he holds off that long," Layneson said and he was no longer grinning. "Watch your step, Dan, I've got a bad feeling. I'll try to keep an eye on those boys, but keep your gun on and don't walk down any dark alleys."

Layneson cut diagonally across the street, a square and stocky figure in the late afternoon's bright sunlight. Dan went on to the barber shop, turned thoughtful by Layneson's warning. Bill knew Snider and he had a nose for this sort of thing. If he was worried, there was reason to worry.

Dan got into the barber chair and lay back, closing his eyes, thinking about Mint Snider. He had known Mint a long time. The big rustler had come into the Ute country ten years earlier and set up as a small rancher in the Apache Hills south of Dan. At first people had accepted his as just another shoestring rancher. But then too many cattle began disappearing and Snider was finally linked with the rustling. There was a raid on the rustler's headquarters when it was located and eight men were caught and hung.

One man made good his escape in the dim light of dawn, but he carried Dan's bullet in his thigh. No one had been able to identify that lone rider, but everyone was certain that it was Mint. He was gone from the country for a year and when he returned, he had a slight limp. There was no actual proof to connect him with the rustling, so he was watched, but not otherwise bothered.

The people distrusted and disliked him; he was alone always, but that was what he wanted. Slowly, he brought together another tough crew and again the ranchers began losing cattle. Now they had the whole thing to do over again and this time Snider smelled it coming Hating Dan for the bad leg and recognizing him as the leader, Snider was not likely to wait for the axe to fall.

When Dan rose from the chair, he felt refreshed. Looking in the mirror, he noticed how the lines that used to erase when he wasn't squinting into the sun now left their pencilled marks on his forehead. He was thirty years old and unmarried and time was getting away from him.

He felt that in Nancy Bellows he had found a completely desireable and lovely woman and it was time to do something about it. He had found that when he was separated from her for very long, he was restless and dissatisfied. If she would have him, he would marry her. But first he would have to take care of Mint Snider, because Snider was a tough and capable fighter and there was no way of knowing how this fight would end.

Going outside, Dan held up for a minute and scanned the street. He saw nothing of Snider or his men, or of Bill Layneson. Crossing to the Palace, he looked in and didn't see any of them. He cruised down the street, made restless and a little worried by Snider's absence.

Abreast of Harrison's Mercantile, a faint warning harked across the dust and stirred some age-old instinct. He stopped at once to whip his gaze along the street, all his senses alert to danger. He saw what had bothered him. Across the street, Long Tom Burke stood in an alcove between two buildings and watched him with ferret-eyed, insolent attention.

So now he knew. Snider had him marked; Snider was watching him. From here on, it was supposed to be a game of cat and mouse, maneuvering for position, waiting. That was the way the game was supposed to be played.

But Dan was a poor hand at the waiting game. The sight of Burke, so patiently watching him, angered Dan. Without thinking, he headed for the gunman. Burke was a tall, string-bean shape against the drab building, a gunman with a bad reputation. He was not a quick thinker and his orders didn't cover this situation. His face showed consternation as Dan came up. Dan stopped three feet from the gunman and spoke harshly.

"FIRE DOWN BELOW"

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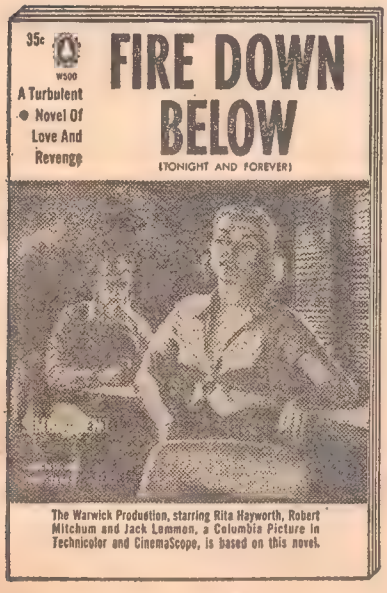
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"I don't like you watching me, Burke. You can go back and tell Snider that. Get out of my sight and stay out."

Dan was doing this coldly, asking for trouble. His temper was a live thing at the moment, pushing him on, making him reckless. Burke was startled, but he had his pride and it rallied now. He flushed slightly.

"You can't talk to me like that, Temple. I'll watch you any time I feel like it."

Burke was a gunman and when he thought of fighting he thought of guns. Therefore, now, when Dan stepped in and swung at him, he did not move his jaw, but drove his hand down for his gun. Dan's fist smashed against his jaw and drove his head back against the building with stunning force. His feet went out from under him and he sat down heavily, dazed. Dan stooped and yanked Burke's gun from its holster and threw it into the street. The quick action had burned some of the anger from him, but not all.

"Tell Mint he better come himself. He doesn't need to send a boy."

DAN walked away. He turned in at the hotel and entered the dining room and took a table against the rear wall. The anger was gone now, leaving him with the usual shaky feeling inside. His was disgusted with himself for not controlling his quick temper, but at least now he knew where he stood. He had thrown his challenge at Snider and Snider would accept it.

It put Dan on the spot. Mint had two men with him, making the odds three to one, or at best two to three. He had to decide whether to call for help, or stand alone. If he wanted help, Dan knew that he could get it. Yet, even while giving, men would think less of him. It was a rule of the land that a man killed his own snakes.

Dan stood alone now with his hard choice before him and the decision had to be made very soon. The waitress brought his meal and he ate it without tasting the food. He left his money on the table and went to the lobby for a cigar. Lighting the cigar, he moved out to the porch and smoked out the cigar as night came fully on the town.

Finally, he knew what he had to do. By bracing Burke, he called Snider. It made it a personal thing and he could not ask for help. He saw now that he had really made his decision that afternoon when he braced Burke.

Leaving the hotel, Dan strolled along the walk and found Bill Layneson posted in the alleyway beside Harrison's. The stocky puncher shook his head and spoke just loud enough for the words to reach Dan.

"They rode out an hour ago and they haven't come back. I'll keep watching."

Dan moved on, giving no impression that he had heard. But he felt better knowing that Bill was on guard. He had faith in Layneson.

Dan strolled out of the business district and turned in at a small, frame house. It was still early. Pleasure stirred his senses as he knocked at the door. For the time being at least, Snider was forgotten.

Nancy called to him to come in. She was in the bedroom, not yet dressed, so he went into the living room and sat down on the couch, talking to her through the partly open bedroom door.

She said, "I heard how you hit Long Tom Burke. What started it, Dan?"

"He was watching me for Snider and I didn't like the idea. I told him to move along and he didn't go."

She thought about that for a minute and when she answered him, her tone was reproving. "You have a bad temper on occasion and you're to impatient. Don't let it pull you in over your head. Be careful of Mint Snider. He won't ever face you until he's ready to fight and he'll have everything in his favor then. He gives me the shivers. His eyes are as cold as a dead man's."

"I'll be careful," he assured her.

She came from the bedroom then and whirled in front of him, laughing, slightly embarassed. She was wearing the rich brown dress she had had fitted earlier in the day. It was the color of her hair

and had a tight bodice that molded her round upper body tightly. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement and she was smiling for him, a little shyly, a coquette's smile.

Rising, he took her hands and held her away while he looked at her.

"You," he said, "are beautiful. I feel sorry for every other man at the dance."

She flushed with pleasure and her eyes filled. She shook her head and regained her composure.

"I'm sorry, Dan, it almost made me cry. That's silly for someone my age, but it's nice to hear a compliment. A woman needs it."

"The town hasn't been good to you, has it?" he asked gravely.

"It isn't their fault, Dan. They have their standards and change comes slowly. I make my living here and it's all I have any right to expect."

He stood before her, made humble by the knowledge that she was better than he was. The people here treated her badly, yet she refused to hate them, or even find serious fault with them. She seemed to pity them for their narrow-mindedness. She was very kind with her judgments. It was a tolerance he could not completely understand and yet he admired her greatly for it.

Taking her arm, he led her quickly from the house, before she could see that he was embarassed.

The dance was held at the Masonic Hall and the music had already begun when they entered. Dan nodded to his many friends, but he didn't receive many return nods. The startled glances thrown at them angered him. He had known these people all his life, yet because he dared to bring a woman they considered their inferior, they cut him.

He took Nancy in his arms and they whirled across the floor. She was light and warm in his arms, she was smiling and gracious, and she looked up at him with a tenderness that stirred him. To this antagonistic crowd, she showed nothing but the greatest possible reserve. Yet, being a woman, she was badly hurt.

Dan danced every dance but one with Nancy. Ben Hedrick, an unreconstructed rebel with the fine manners of the South, had that one. He made quite a show of asking Dan's permission so that no person in the hall missed seeing him. He was well aware of what was going on here, but he refused to be a party to it. His wife, who was fifteen years his junior, would give him the devil later on, but she would get nowhere. Ben Hedrick had his own strict beliefs and no man or woman influenced them in any degree. So, he danced with Nancy Bellows and she thanked him with her eyes.

Ben bowed low when he returned Nancy to Dan. He said, in his booming voice, "Thank you for dancing with an old man, Mrs. Bellows." To Dan, he said, "Consider yourself a lucky man," and retreated across the floor to his glaring wife and daughter.

"It was nice of him," Nancy said.

"Ben's all right. He can be a little rough sometimes, but he sticks by his friends."

THEREAFTER, they danced every piece together. Dan's temper was badly frayed at first and then he found that was more hurt than angry. These were the people he had always counted as friends. It was a little tough to have to have them ignore him. Nancy seemed not to notice, but it got under his hide.

At one o'clock, with the three musicians dead drunk, the dance broke up. Dan buckled on his gunbelt before they left the hall and he was alert as they came out. He made sure that Nancy stayed on his left. The town was quiet, except for the shouted farewells of the departing dancers. Main was deserted, except for a few horses drowsing at the racks. Dan and Nancy walked down Main in silence. He was still brooding over their reception at the dance and she seemed to sense what was troubling him.

Finally she asked, "It was a little tough on you, wasn't it, Dan? I shouldn't have gone with you."

"I wanted you to go," he said, a little

too vehemently. "It doesn't matter what they think."

"It does, though," she replied sadly. "I saw your face and it hurt when your old friends wouldn't speak."

"All right," he admitted, "it did bother me some. But not enough to make any difference between us. If it is a question of them or you, I'll take you."

They were abreast of the Palace now and Bill Layneson came out of the deep shadows and tipped his hat to Nancy. He gave Dan a brief shake of the head and passed down the street. The sight of Layneson had jerked Dan's thoughts back to Snider, but now he relaxed. It looked as if Snider had passed up a fight.

At the house, Nancy asked Dan in. They went into the living room and he stood in the center of the room while she found a lamp and lit it. When she turned to him, he walked to her and took her into his arms. He saw the plain break of feeling on her face and bent his head and kissed her. Her arms circled his neck as she clung to him, returning the kiss with equal fervor.

Her body was fully and softly against him, arousing all his male instincts. But then she seemed to remember something and pushed back. Dan glimpsed the soft, dreaming look in her eyes before she dropped her guard and shut him out. Her breasts were rising and falling beneath the tight material of the dress and she was breathing very fast.

"Nancy," he said quickly, afraid that she had misunderstood his motives, "would you consider me—"

She reached up and closed his lips with gentle fingers.

"Don't, Dan. Don't make it any tougher than it is now. You're feeling sorry for me right now. Don't mistake sympathy for love. I wouldn't want sympathy from you. I saw your face tonight when your friends wouldn't speak remember? Make sure that you want me enough to take that before you ask me."

He stood mute, thinking of what she had said. Maybe she was right. In a way, he supposed that he did feel sorry for her. He didn't think that was all, or even a big part of it, but if it was, it wasn't enough. And it had hurt him to have his friends cut him dead. This was something he would have to think over.

He said, "All right, Nancy, I'll wait awhile. But it won't change anything."

"I hope not, Dan."

He kissed her lightly on the lips and left the house with the clearest possible picture of her standing there, so still and so beautiful..

Dan felt no urge to sleep. Made restless by the scene with Nancy, he prowled the street, thrashing it out in his mind. He was ashamed of himself for not being sure. Nancy had sensed that indecision when she put him off. He was sorry for her, but he knew that wasn't all of it. If it wasn't love, it was very near. Yet, it wasn't that which stopped him. It was the attitude of his friends. He knew it was wrong and that he should not have let it affect him, but it had. It would be a tough thing to have the friends of a lifetime avoid you.

In this country, he had always been assured of a welcome anywhere and in marrying Nancy, he might be giving up that privilege. He was being selfish and he knew it, but he couldn't help himself. He wasn't thinking straight, which was sign enough that he was badly troubled. Out of all his jumbled thinking, only one point was finally clear. If he loved her, any sacrifice was worth making to have her. If he didn't, the sacrifice might break up their marriage. But how would he know?

He was passing the Palace and decided to stop in for a drink, thinking that he might see Bill Layneson. He was no longer worried about Mint Snider and therefore, walked into the saloon without caution. The moment he stepped through the door, he saw that he had made a fatal mistake.

The sight of Mint Snider, Willie Matoon hit him with the shock of a flung bucket and Long Tom Burke posted at the bar hit him with the shock of a flung bucket of ice water. All the muscles in his face

went stiff and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck raising. To see Snider's face, so coldly triumphant told him that this was no chance meeting. The rustler had set a trap and he had walked into it like a fool. Dan swore under his breath, but his mind was working feverishly, trying to see a way out.

Matoon and Burke were standing at the left end of the bar. Snider stood halfway along, in front of the doors and directly ahead of Dan. There was nothing to be done about Burke and Matoon, except to keep them in sight. Snider was the fastest man and therefore, it was on Snider that he laid his greatest attention.

"It's a nice evening, Dan," Snider said casually, not trying to conceal his pleasure.

"Fair," Dan replied evenly and stepped aside to free his right side from the nearest table.

"You made a mistake, letting me see you with Lowe and Hedrick," Snider said conversationally. "It didn't take much figuring to know what was up. It was a bad mistake."

"Everyone makes mistakes," Dan said.

Snider had straightened and now moved clear of the bar. It was coming now. Dan had only one real regret, a regret that he had not told Nancy Bellows that he loved her. Now, with his life about to run out, he knew. He was sure and now he would never be able to tell her. Her lovely face was before him and he wondered how he could ever have been in doubt about loving her.

He saw Snider's face get that blank, dead look that precedes action and he put all thoughts from his mind. In that tense instant, Bill Layneson's hard voice broke the silence of the room.

"Burke, you and Matoon stand hitched," Bill said.

He had come out of the saloon's back room and was behind the two gunmen. He had them cold. Dan felt a wave of relief wash through him and he saw the break of a terrible anger on Snider's usually impassive face.

"Dan," Snider said, "you always was a fool for luck."

He made a small motion with his left hand to distract Dan's attention and drew. Dan saw the rustler's arm dip and come up smoothly and felt his own hand slap the walnut butt of his gun, grab it and lift it from the holster. Snider fired from the hip, the big bullet smashing through the slats of the door behind Dan. Dan raised his gun to shoulder level seeing Snider frantically thumbing back the hammer for a second shot.

Time was suspended and every motion seemed ridiculously slow. Dan saw the blue front of Snider's shirt in his sights and dropped the hammer. He saw the shock of the impact widen Snider's eyes with surprise and swift pain. Snider dropped his gun and staggered back into the bar. He held there a moment, his baleful eyes hating Dan, and then he went down in a loose slide to the floor and did not move. Dan holstered his gun and looked at Long Tom Burke and Willie Matoon.

"You boys leave your guns and ride out. Don't stop in this state."

"You sure you want to let 'em go, Dan?" Layneson asked in surprise.

"Mint was the leader and Mint's dead. The rest of them will ride on. Thanks for the help, Bill. They had me in a pocket."

"It was too close," Layneson said. "I was scouting around and run across their horses in a shed down the alley. They'd sneaked back into town without me seein' them. I had to make fast time gettin' here." He moved in and lifted the rustlers guns. He prodded them with his gun barrel. "All right, get out," he told them.

They hurried from the saloon, neither of them glancing at the fallen Snider.

Dan heard voices approaching and said, "I'll see you later."

He left the saloon hurriedly and kept to the shadows as he moved away. The men coming up didn't see him. He heard Ben Hedrick's loud voice but he didn't stop. Layneson could explain it.

There was a light burning at Nancy's and when he knocked, she opened the

door at once, her face white and frightened.

"Oh, Dan," she cried when she saw him and she came into his arms.

He held her and was surprised to find that she was shaking. "I heard the shooting," she said, with her face against his chest. "I was afraid it was you."

"Mint drew on me. I had to kill him."

"As long as you're all right," she said fiercely. "If he had hurt you, I'd have killed him myself." He was moved and he tipped her head and looked into her eyes.

"It did one good thing. It told me about you. I love you and I want to marry you."

She protested lightly. "They won't like it."

He smiled. "They will in time—when they get to know you. And they will get to know you through me. If not, we'll sell out and go somewhere else. It's a big country, and I know now that you are more important to me than anything."

"Then the answer is yes, darling," she said and she turned her face up to him and let him see all of the hope and all of the longing she had kept hidden for so long.

He held her close and he bent to kiss her, he saw the promise that her dark eyes held for him.

AN HONORABLE PRISONER

RIDING into town on a miserably hot, dusty August morning in the late 1860's, the cowpoke jolted to a sudden stop just as he came in sight of the squat adobe jail. For there sat J. C. McGrew right in front of the calaboose when he ought to have been inside, behind the bars!

Now McGrew was a Mason County rancher who was much respected, but he had killed a man. Sheriff John Walters had brought him into Fredericksburg several days before for what he liked to call "safe-keeping." And the cowpoke, having heard that the sheriff had locked his prisoner up, was surprised to see him outside, apparently free as the breeze.

Prodded by curiosity, the cowboy kneed his mount over to where McGrew sat tilted back against the shady side of the building, whittling away on a piece of greasewood.

"Howdy, J. C.," he said.

"Mornin'," answered McGrew.

"How come you ain't in jail," the cowpoke asked bluntly.

"I am in jail," McGrew answered, looking up but not stopping by a fraction of a second his whittling.

"What you mean?" the cowpoke asked, slightly annoyed. "I don't see no bars in front of that ugly mug of yours."

"Don't need none," McGrew retorted. "I ain't runnin' away. Besides, I made a deal with the sheriff."

"What kind of deal?"

"Well, it's thisaway," the rancher drawled. "I didn't see no need of Sheriff Walters puttin' hisself out none by bringin' me meals three times a day. So I told him to just leave the cell door unlocked so's I could go out and get my own victuals. Bein' a right practical man, he agreed, and took my word for it that I wouldn't skedaddle. Oh, I hedge a bit now and then, but it's only to meander into the saloon for some necessary refreshment."

"Hmph!" was all the bewildered cowpoke could say. He wouldn't have believed a word of it if McGrew hadn't been sitting right there before his very eyes. Then he asked, "Whereabout's the sheriff?"

"Ain't got the least idea," McGrew answered. "Must be out of town somewhere. Leastways, I ain't seen him for a week."

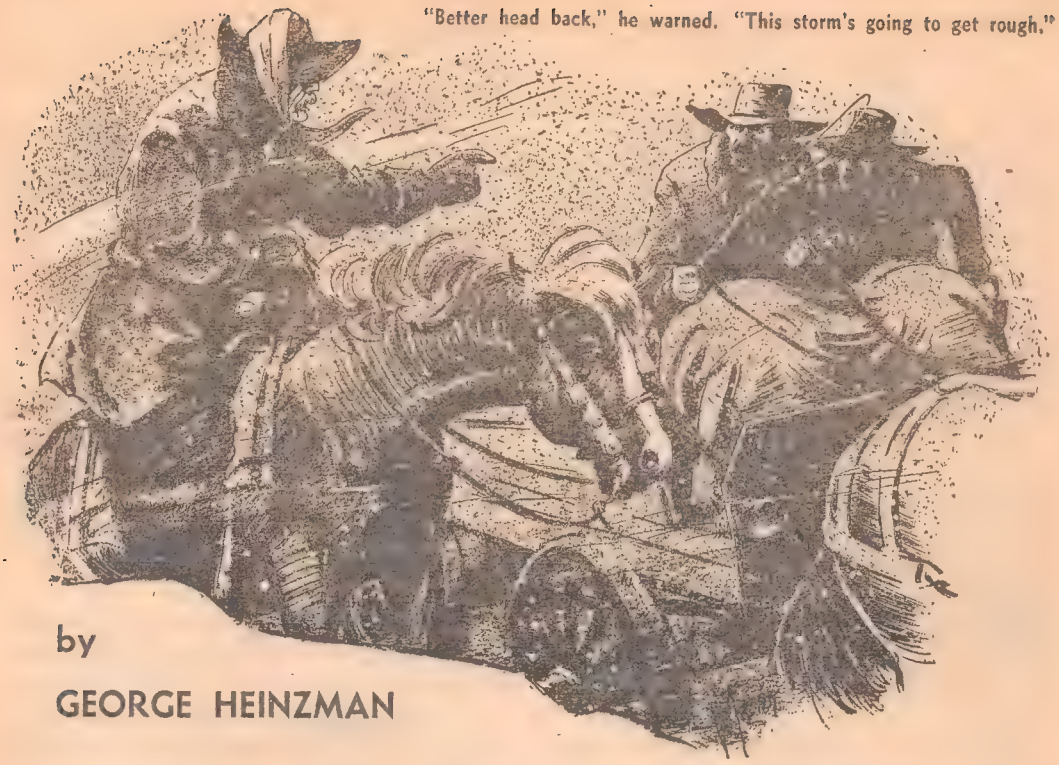
The cowpoke wiped beads of sweat from his hot, dusty face with a red bandanna. "Pretty hot," he said. "It's a good thing you don't have to stay all cooped up in that there pokey all day. Even so, it must be pretty much like sleeping in an oven at night."

"Don't bother me none," said McGrew. "I hedge a little on the sheriff there, too. I move my bed out back. It gets real cool-like toward mornin'."

A few minutes later, the cowpoke was clutching a little needed refreshment himself in the saloon nearby. Cogitating on the vagaries of frontier justice—and of J. C. McGrew vs. Texas in particular—he felt as though he had seen everything.

Sometime later, when court was convened at Mason, the county seat, Sheriff Walters and his prisoner climbed into a buggy and drove over. There McGrew was tried in short order—and acquitted.

—NORMAN RENARD



"Better head back," he warned. "This storm's going to get rough."

by

GEORGE HEINZMAN

NESTER HATER

Old Jed didn't aim to let any fool nesters drive him off his own land

JED BOWEN raised his eyes from his horse's ears where he had been gazing abstractedly. His grizzled hard-bitten features were set in determined lines as his squinted eyes surveyed the slate-gray bank of clouds lying low across the plains to the west. The bank of clouds was slowly spreading across the horizon and almost imperceptively stretching across the vast inverted bowl of ice blue sky overhead.

A gust of chill wind coming across fifty miles of rolling plains from the Bighorns caught him full in the face. He tugged the brim of his Stetson low over his eyes, and turned the collar of his buffalo coat up around the shaggy graying nape of his neck and weather-beaten ears.

He grunted Indian-like. Damn good thing he knew this land like he did his own tough belly. Long before he reached his spread in JB Coulee, twenty miles down the Powder River, snow would fly thicker than the hair on Old Dun's back. One of those fool nesters down along the river would wind up asleep in a snow bank, not knowing the land. Asleep for good.

The dun between his legs turned his head into the JB trail without prompting. Jed reined him in at the brim of the rise and looked back at Alvarna. The argument with Bill Towsley still boiled in his chest as he picked out the frame bank building where Bill sat in his cushioned chair.

A wry grin curled the corner of Jed Bowen's mouth as he thought back over it. He turned from gazing at Alvarna, back to the JB trail.

Bill had given in of course. What else could he do? Now Jed would send those nesters hightailing. He had prior rights to the land. Hadn't he taken it and held it for twenty years against all comers? He had waited for this, the right time to put the pressure on. Wait until the settlers were deep in debt, low on supplies—then cut off their credit. Already discouraged, they would despair of all hope.

They had come in with the railroad that stretched its long thin finger across the northeastern Wyoming plains. Come in like locusts to settle along the creeks and rivers, cutting off the dry benchlands behind them from water. They strung their barb wire fences around their 640 acre tracts. The homesteaders, small people out to carve a home from this barren land.

Spreading out along the watercourses from the railroads, they reached Jed's range the second year. Wyoming Territory had become a state four years before and was growing fast.

Jed's conversation with Banker William Towsley had started calmly enough in Towsley's little back office at the Alvarna Bank.

"They can't last," Jed had said. "They'll starve out. You know that, Bill, same as I do."

"But, Jed, it's the law." Bill Towsley spoke quietly yet firmly as he regarded the rancher. "You can't stop them."

"I can starve them out and I will. Bringing their women and children out onto this dry plain! Why, they deserve to die."

"Jed, they want to make a home for themselves just as you did when you came here. Legally, they're entitled to that land."

Jed slammed his half smoked cigar to the board floor and ground it viciously under his boot.

"Entitle to it be damned!" Jed's heated voice rose. "Why, I'm entitle to it by right of being here first, by coming in and making this country a fit place to live in. I've lived on that bench along the river for almost twenty years now, and I'm not leaving for any fool nesters."

Towsley waited patiently then said, "I know all that, Jed. Haven't I been here over ten years myself? But you know the homestead law as well as I do. All they have to do is live on that land and it's theirs."

"That's just what I mean, Bill. Their first year won't be up till green grass comes. Now's the time to stop them. I know old man Wilson over at the store won't give them any credit without even asking him. He's an oldtimer like me. Now if you'll just stop, they'll have to pull stakes. They're already in debt to you and they're outta supplies. Stop their credit. Starve them out."

"I can't do it, Jed. I would lose what they owe already. They'll get a full crop this year and they'll all be able to pay up."

Jed drew a deep breath. He hated to do it to his old friend but he saw now that he had to show his hole card.

"Bill, I'm still half-owner of this bank. I didn't think I'd have to remind you. And I say they're a poor credit risk. You know our agreement back when I staked you to a start here. I got final say in any showdown. That's it."

He arose with a sigh and took the door knob in a gnarled hand, then turned to ease the tension a little.

"Bill, don't worry about what they owe you already. I'll personally make it up to the bank—after they're gone."

THINKING back over that ultimatum now brought a grim smile to Jed's lips. Of course Bill Towsley was worried about the money owed him, but his conscience was probably bothering him too. Jed couldn't afford to let his conscience get to him, those nesters had his cows cut off from water.

His red nose sniffed the crisp air as the first flecks of snow stung his face. He reached into the collar of his buffalo coat to pull a faded neckerchief half over his face. He drew it up around his hat, be-

hind, tying the brim over his ears. This was going to be a real man-buster, an oldtimer like that winter of '86.

The flying white specks grew thicker and sifted into the fur of his heavy bearskin chaps. The wind was scudding the dry flakes across the plains now. The sagebrush and scattered grass bent before it, and snow lodged in the collar of Jed's coat and in the iron-gray hair under his low pulled hat.

Jed thought back over the years as Old Dun carried him homeward. There had always been plenty of elbow room, that is until last spring. But he had cut their source of supply now and he had the upper hand. Maybe the law wouldn't let him gun them out as he had the rustlers in years gone by. But this was legal. This storm, probably the last of the year, would catch them already low on supplies and unable to get more.

The blizzard had thickened as he rode engrossed in his thoughts. Under the leaden sky the land was a white expanse except along the tops of barren rises and where tufts of sagebrush or bunch grass showed, leaving a bare spot on the downwind side.

He had watched the wagon approach for about five minutes before they met. Two men were huddled in their coats on the seat. Jed recognized them as two of the homesteaders. Though Jed hated them with a passion, he grudgingly let his better nature win.

"Better head back," he warned gruffly, pulling up his horse as they passed. "This storm's going to be a rough one. You'll either have to stay in town or get lost going home."

"Reckon we'll go on." Frank Murdock, holding the reins, gazed narrowly with hostile eyes. "My young one's bad sick and I got to get the doc." He yelled at the team and the wagon creaked on. They knew the cowman was trying to starve them out, that he wouldn't be above misleading them to keep them from getting badly needed supplies. *[Turn page]*

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Let the butt-headed fools go, Jed thought as he rode on. Let them die. It'd serve them right, for not listening to someone who knew.

But that sick baby down in Murdock's shack preyed on his mind. Probably the same kid he had seen that night last summer. The drought had been at its height that August night and had finally forced Jed to act.

His cows had been gathered along the homesteaders fences, lowing plaintively as they smelled the river beyond. He and his punchers cut the fences and drove the cattle to water. As he passed one shack, a brawny landholder, this same Frank Murdock, had stepped out from the group standing before the shack.

"Run them cows back where they belong," he shouted. "Get off our land."

"Your land be damned!" Jed snarled. "Fight for it like I did. You can't take it away from me with barbed wire."

Murdock started forward, ripping off his shirt. A woman ran from the group, one arm curled around a baby, probably the same one that was sick now. She clutched the man's arm with her free hand.

"Don't, Frank! Oh no, they've got guns!"

The homesteader halted, eyeing the Winchesters resting across saddle horns.

"Get a gun, clodhopper," old Jed roared. "Like a man. I won't fight school kid style. I tamed this land with a Colt and a Winchester and by thunder I'll hold it with them!"

Murdock had reluctantly allowed his wife to pull him back.

Now that baby she had held that night was sick in bed. No food, his daddy gone to town and unable to make it back in the blizzard. A papoose like that can't help it if his old man brings him into this country. Maybe he'd better ease on over that way and see if he could be of some help.

THE storm was thick around Jed now, the wind blasting the snow at his face, and he couldn't see much farther than Dun's ears. But from long years he knew the trail without seeing. Here was Coyote Gulch now, almost drifted full. He reined his mount to the left to follow along its side. Murdock's shack wasn't far from here and he would go and have a look.

He was heading full into the storm now, down toward the frozen river. The gate loomed black before Dun's nose. Jed drew his right hand from its mitten, leaned from the saddle to unfasten the gate. Dun's shoulder against it pushed it back against the drifted snow.

A few hundred yards then and the shack appeared blackly out of the storm. The drift on the lee side was building up fast, but Jed dismounted and fought through it. He looped the reins over a post beside the door, pushed against the door and swung it open. A blast of wind-borne snow swept in with him, but he smashed the door shut and turned back to the room, shaking snow from his bulky coat.

The woman was almost on him, rushing to him. Her eyes popped wide as she stopped with the realization it was not her husband. A gasp escaped her lips as she wheeled and ran back across the shack, grabbed an ancient muzzle loader from where it leaned against the wall. She turned and leveled it full at Jed.

"Don't take another step." Her voice quavered but didn't break.

"Oh, put it down, Ma'am," Jed said. "I just came to help your youngster. Blame thing probably wouldn't shoot anyway," he added, a crooked smile twisting his frost whitened face.

"You scared me a minute," she said, lowering the gun. "At first I thought it was Frank, then—"

"Yeah, I know," Jed said imperturbedly. He loosened his neckerchief, pulled off his hat and shook the snow from it.

Silently his buffalo coat came off as he took in the room. The floor was rough winnie-edge slabs and the walls were lined with building paper, scant protection against the bitting wind. A fire blazed on an open hearth and directly in front of it, a child lay wrapped in a blanket in a home-made crib. An older woman bent

over it, gently soothing the child's face with a moist cloth. Two older children sat on a bunk, big round eyes gazing at Jed from pinched faces.

He moved over beside the older woman at the crib.

"That's Sarah Knowles," young Helen Murdock said. "She came over to help with the baby. Frank and her husband, Emmett, went to town for the doctor and some vittles."

"Yeah, I met them," Jed's muffled voice came from where he leaned over the crib. The baby was gasping for breath, his face was turning blue as suddenly Jed rammed a bulky forefinger deep into its mouth.

"What are you doing? Stop!" Helen screamed as she ran to grab his arm.

With a convulsive shrug Jed threw her off and continued probing. The baby had stopped breathing altogether. Then Jed's big forefinger slowly emerged, a long string of phlegm clinging to it. The baby gasped as air entered his lungs again. He panted furiously for breath.

Jed straightened up then and watched the baby a moment. Helen came slowly to his side.

"I didn't understand. I thought—" she said.

"Forget it." Jed's voice was gruff. Despite the cold room he wiped perspiration from his creased face. "That was close."

He turned to the young mother.

"Look, Mrs. Murdock. This baby's real sick. I got an old Injun over at my place that knows a lot about these things we don't. I'll send him over."

"But—an Indian? What can an ignorant savage do?" Helen's voice was apprehensive.

"He's not so ignorant and he's not so savage. This tyke's got lung fever, unless I miss my guess, Mrs. Murdock. And Slewfoot pulled me through it back a few years ago. He's got herbs and roots that —well, you just let him cook them up and

[Turn page]

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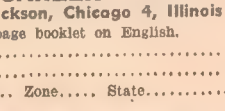

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"I can do that, Mr. Bowen—now. And Frank'll be back soon with the doctor."

"Frank won't be back till this blizzard's over. He wouldn't dare leave town."

Helen's head was high with pride. "Frank will be back. Nothing will stop him. He's not afraid of the storm nor of you."

Jed looked at the pinch-faced children to hide the grudging admiration on his face. "I ain't doubtin' he's brave, ma'am. But this storm is too much for anyone who ain't lived in this country for years. Better give them kids something to eat or they'll be down with it too," he growled.

"I will, soon as ever Frank gets back. We've nothing till they get here."

"I'm telling you, Mrs. Murdock, they won't be back for a week at least, maybe more. If it wasn't so late in the winter it might be even a month or more." Jed studied a minute. "I'll send Slewfoot over."

Something in his face and bearing made Helen refrain from further argument.

HE PULLED on his heavy buffalo coat then the Stetson. Finally the neckerchief to hold the hat brim over his ears.

"Better let him have his way when he gets here," Jed said as he turned to the door.

"Well, if he gets here before Frank," was Helen's reluctant concession.

"He will," Jed said in parting.

The blizzard was a white wall around him now, tearing and ripping at him. But Jed and Old Dun found their way unerringly back through the gate, back up Coyote Gulch and along the JB trail, now completely covered except where wind whipped it bare on high rises. Dun eased into JB Coulee and stopped at the round-pole corral of the home ranch. Jed turned him to the long low stable where the winter horses were kept.

He forked some hay to his horse, grained him, and gave him a brisk rub-down, then faced the storm on foot to

walk the few paces to the log ranchhouse. Three men were playing stud while the other two were lying on bunks that lined the wall. Old Slewfoot was sitting cross-legged before the open fire.

The winter crew consisted of these five men and four others who were wintering in two line camps. Slewfoot was kept on as handyman year-round.

Curly Milner, Jed's foreman, pushed back from the game to get up and shut the door after Jed. Jed stiffly pulled off his coat, hat and his shaggy chaps. He strode to the fire where he briskly rubbed his hands and face.

"Did you get them blocked off at the bank?" Curly finally asked when Jed remained silent.

"Yeah." Jed was silently staring at the fire, his brow drawn up in heavy wrinkles. Finally he turned to Curly. His gruff voice carried an unaccustomed note of apology.

"We got them cut off all right and they'll have to leave," he said. "But we can't let them women and children set there and starve. That Frank Murdock is in town with another one trying to get supplies and the Doc. He can't make it back. And his young kid is lying there with lung fever and no medicine and nothin' to eat."

He stuck the cigarette he had been rolling into the corner of his mouth, and held a burning splinter from the fire to it.

"I'm taking Slewfoot over to doctor him, and some grub." He looked up at Curly then with a belligerent expression, as though expecting an objection. Their eyes locked and finally Curly's were the first to drop.

"Reckon that's only human," he said. "We can't blame them kids and womenfolk for it. I'll rassle up a bag of grub."

Slewfoot had remained staring into the fire, but now arose and stalked stoicely over to Jed, his lame leg dragging slightly.

"You helpum now?" he said, his sharply chiseled old face held high.

"Yes."

"Many snows ago I was Eagle-That-Rides, not Slewfoot. Kill many buffalo,

[Turn page]

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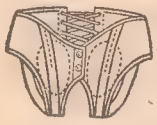

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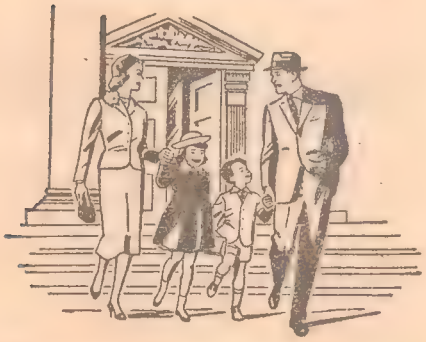

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for food. White man come. Kill all buffalo, leave to rot on plains. Make room for white man buffalo, his cow. Buffalo gone when cow come. Maybe cow gone when plow come. Cow follow buffalo—maybe so."

"No, Slewfoot. My cows ain't going to follow your buffalo. Then settlers are going to pull stakes, but I won't starve their squaws and papooses. Savvy?"

Jed turned back to Milner. "And we're doing more than that. They're *all* outta grub, not just the Murdock's. And God knows how long they'll be snowed in."

He outlined his plans then and soon the men were pulling on their heaviest clothes and heading for the stables to saddle up their winter horses. Jed left Old Dun to rest and selected another horse.

The thick swirling blizzard brought night early and it was virtually dark when the men returned, but their job was done. All along the frozen river at every homesteader's shack, the same scene had been enacted. Shots had sounded from outside then a yell, "Hello the house!"

When the settler flung his door open, it was to see shadowy riders in the storm and a still dark shape in the drifted snow at his door.

"There's some slow elk for you—meat for your youngsters," would come the voice of a rider, then they disappeared in the blizzard as the dumbfounded but thankful settler turned back for heavy coat and long knife. The fresh killed beef was a gift from heaven. That night each shack heard a fervent prayer of thanksgiving, and blessing for the enemy turned benefactor.

March is late for a storm like that, and within a week a warming chinook blew down out of the Bighorns. Jed and his men were saddling up to check how the stock had weathered the storm when Slewfoot rode up.

"Did the farmer get home?" Jed asked.

"Him home. Empty wagon. Papoose all right." Slewfoot thought that finished his report, but as he turned to go, Jed stopped him.

"Murdock say anything?"

"Start to knock me down. Squaw stop him." Slewfoot almost smiled. "She tell what you do. Tell him can do something too."

"What do you mean, told him he could do what?"

"Donno. Man tell me go home now. No hear."

That concluded the report, and Jed brushed it off as unimportant. Whatever Murdock could do wouldn't be much. Before the dry season came again they would all have to pull out and his range would run clear to the river again.

THE spring work was getting underway and for several weeks Jed had no time for thoughts of the homesteaders. The men were all bog riding these days and Jed worked right alongside his men at this never ending job.

The spring thaws had left the range soaking in water. Low spots were mudholes, and along the draws and stream courses that in summer would be dry, bogs and marshes lined the swollen streams. Cows, in attempting to reach water to drink, were constantly being mired down in the marshy ground.

The men rode in teams of two, searching the bog areas. Jed and one of his men were working Coyote Gulch this day. When they found a cow, a rope was tossed over her horns, and the animal would be dragged to where it could regain its feet. Once it was necessary for Jed to dismount and go on foot to a cow to help. Her horns were laid back in the mud and a rope couldn't be gotten over them.

The animal was never grateful and always ready to attack its benefactor. Sometimes it would return to the bog immediately after being released and have to be roped again.

They had already pulled five cows from the mud. As they reached the end of the gulch, where the Murdock fence crossed it, they turned their horses to pick a way back up onto the benchland. As Jed came above ground level where he could see more than just the blue sky and fleecy

[Turn page]

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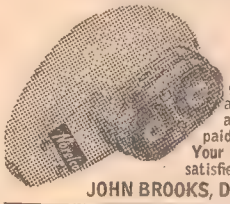

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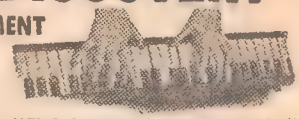

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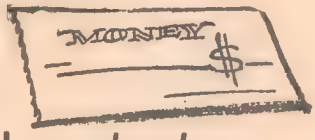

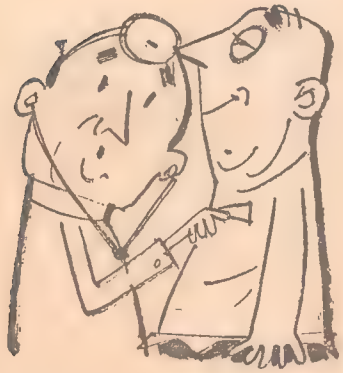

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clouds, he automatically turned to look at the fence.

Where was it? Then Jed saw it. Instead of joining the Knowles fence, it turned abruptly and ran toward the river. About four hundred yards from it, the Knowles fence stopped sharply and headed toward the river also, leaving a wide aisle between the two. Jed studied it a minute then turned to the rider at his side.

"I don't know what this means but I aim to find out," he said. "Curly is working down along Big Medicine. Get him up here on the run."

He swung his horse toward the river and loped down the wide aisle. As the river came in sight he saw several of his cattle standing there, a few drinking from the swollen stream. There were two men on foot where the Murdock fence stopped a few yards short of the river. As he approached them, he saw that they were setting a fence post, apparently extending the line on toward the river.

Murdock straightened and rubbed his back as Jed pulled up. He wiped perspiration from his face and smiled.

"How does she look?" Murdock's grin was disarming.

"This strip of land," Frank Murdock said. "We've still got to finish stringing fence and we'll need some more to finish out."

He stopped to again swipe away the sweat. "This strip's yours. We got together and decided there was plenty of room here for everybody, and there sure ought to be water enough. We each gave up 200 yards of our land. That still leaves us more than a lot of homesteaders have with their quarter and half sections. And it allowed strips like this, four hundred yards wide, between every other claim. You got six such strips along the twelve miles of river. Reckon that'll water your cows?"

"Reckon it will." Jed was puzzled and his voice strained. He couldn't quite understand.

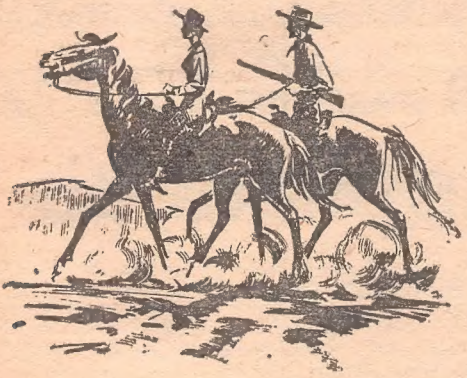
"Soon as we prove up on our land," Murdock continued, "we're deeding these strips to you. Would you come up to the

house and eat a slab of steak off one of your cows? We'd be mighty pleased to have you!"

Red-faced, Jed mumbled an excuse and hightailed it toward his home range only to run headon into Milner. Curly pulled his horse up from a dead run, holding his Winchester high in one hand. They turned and rode toward the home ranch at a slower gait.

Jed briefly told Curly about the water lanes and they rode on in silence. So that was what Murdock's wife had told him he could do, Jed thought. It was her idea. Maybe there was room for everybody. And maybe cow follow buffalo like Slewfoot had said, and maybe *not* so by a helluva lot.

"Reckon I better ride into town," Jed said to Curly. "Got to talk to Bill Towsley at the bank. The ole skinflint has got too tight on loans lately and I better loosen him up some!"



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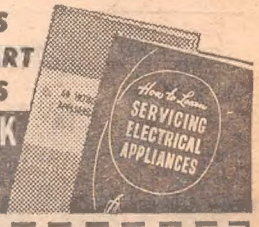

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